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THE APE-MEN OF XLOTLI

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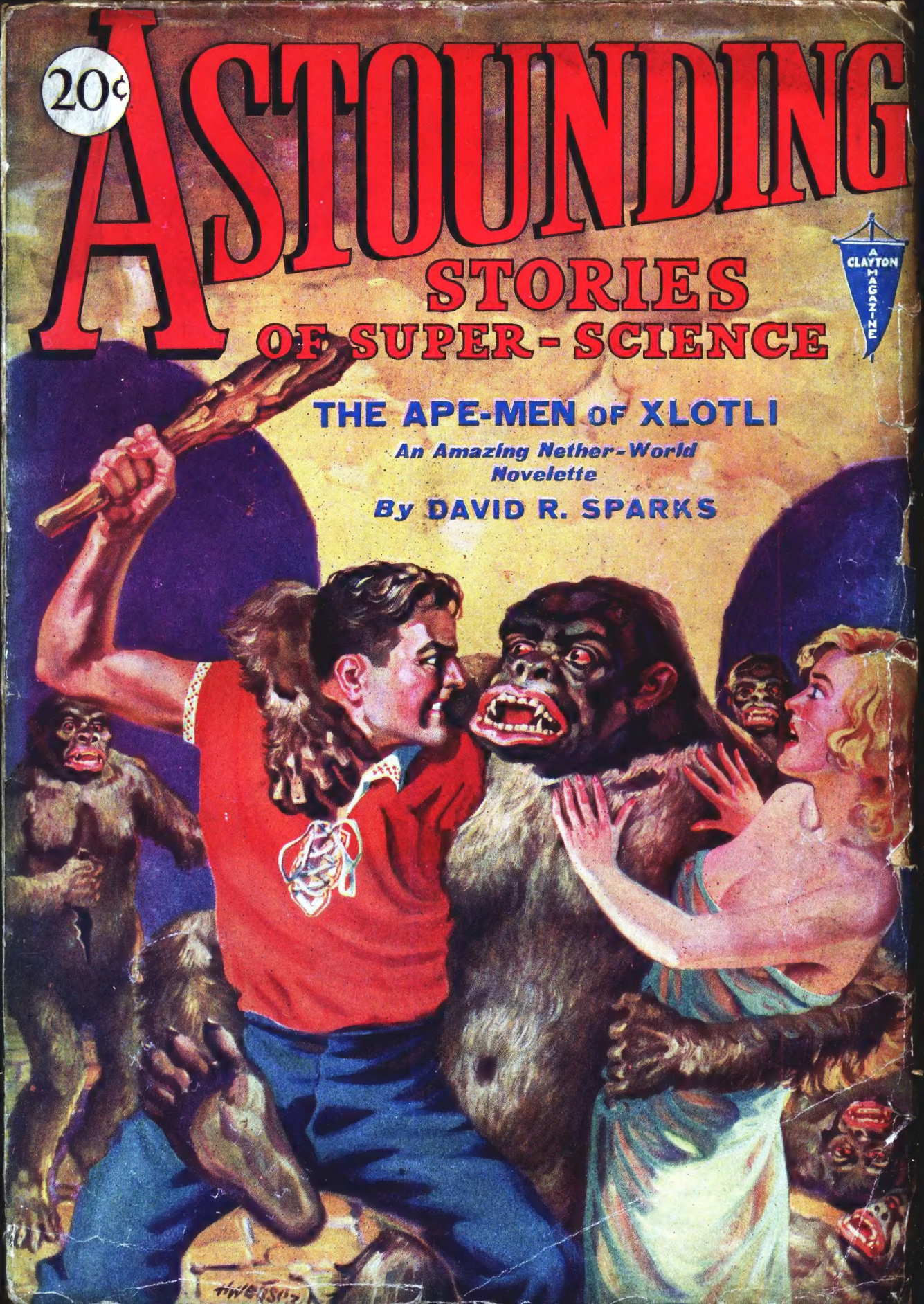
By DAVID R. SPARKS



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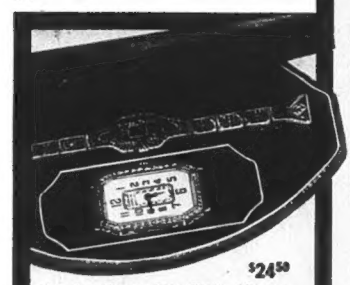

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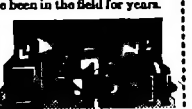

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VOL. IX, No. 3

CONTENTS

DECEMBER, 1930

COVER DESIGN — H. W. WESSOLOWSKI
Painted in Oils from a Scene in "The Ape-Men of Xlotli."

SLAVES OF THE DUST — SOPHIE WENZEL ELLIS — 291
Fate's Retribution Was Adequate. There Emerged a Rat with a Man's Head and Face.

THE PIRATE PLANET — CHARLES W. DIFFIN — 310
It is War. Interplanetary War. And on Far-Distant Venus Two Fighting Earthlings Stand Up Against a Whole Planet Run Amuck. (Part Two of a Four-Part Novel.)

THE SEA TERROR — CAPTAIN S. P. MEEK — 336
The Trail of Mystery Gold Leads Carnes and Dr. Bird to a Tremendous Monster of the Deep.

GRAY DENIM — HARL VINCENT — 354
The Blood of the Van Dorn's Ran in Karl's Veins. He Rode the Skies Like an Avenging God.

THE APE-MEN OF XLOTLI — DAVID R. SPARKS — 370
A Beautiful Face in the Depths of a Geyser—and Kirby Plunges into a Desperate Mid-Earth Conflict with the Dreadful Feathered Serpent. (A Complete Novelette.)

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MOST of the world **works** for a living—works hard, too. But that doesn't mean **you** have to. Why **not play** for a living? Do something you like to do, and **make** it pay you big money. Plenty of men and women **who** had a hard time to get along six months ago—are **now** making from $50 to $100 a week—playing their Hawaiian Guitars. And they didn't know how to read a single note of music when they came to me.

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The haunting, soft, melodious strumming of the Hawaiian Guitar is America's most popular music. Everywhere orchestras are looking for men and women who can play the Hawaiian Guitar. Everywhere those who have mastered the Hawaiian Guitar are getting paid more and more money. Roy Reikane writes in, "I have made $200 extra money in 6 weeks playing my Hawaiian Guitar." Carlton E. Scarbro recently wrote me, "I have made $1,000 since I took your course." Granville Smith writes, "I make $3 a night and play only 4 hours."

One of the Dozens of Photographs that will help you Learn Quickly

Hundreds of such letters have come in. But let me tell you about my short-cut to good times and big pay—my simplified method of learning to play the Hawaiian Guitar at home in a few weeks. A new method—so easy to understand—so much fun to learn—that even a child can pick it up. (We have successfully taught children only 8 years of age.)

Pictures Instead of Words, Teach You

I don't care if you have never read a note in your life, or don't know what a Hawaiian Guitar looks like. All I ask is that you **like** music, My methods are so clear and easy to understand that you will actually play a real melody after the very first lesson. Sounds uncanny; doesn't it? Here's how I do it.

With your lessons I send dozens of photographs showing just how to place your fingers, how to strum the strings. My Kno-All and Master charts teach you to read notes almost automatically. It's as simple as learning your A B C's over again. Some of our students become finished musicians the first month, others take a little longer, but they all learn with surprising speed.

Lonesome? It's a Sure Cure!

Once you have mastered the Hawaiian Guitar, the world lies waiting at your feet. You can travel anywhere, meet the best people, live in real style and comfort, and gain a host of friends. All this is yours, waiting for you, if you are willing to spend a few minutes a day with me for a few short weeks.

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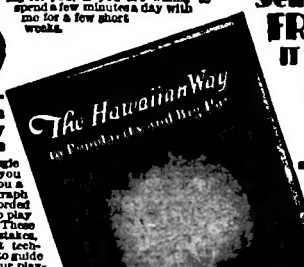

And we don't miss a single one. To make sure that you can't go wrong, we send you a complete set of regular phonograph records, on which is recorded every melody you learn to play before taking the course. These help you to correct minor mistakes, and inspire you of perfect technique. With these records to guide you, the tiniest error in your playing is quickly corrected. These records are absolutely free with the course and are an excellent addition to your home music as well.

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"You folks must think I can't play!"

I cried, when they laughed at my offer

IT was the monthly get-together of our little group and the fun was at its height. Mabel had just finished singing a touching version of "Frankie and Johnnie" when I offered to play.

"Boy! This is going to be good! Did you folks hear that? Jim said *he'd play for us!*" cried Tom.

I pretended to be highly insulted. Drawing myself up with mock dignity, I said, "You folks must think I can't play! Why, the very idea!"

This caused a fresh explosion of laughter. "Can't play!" called someone. "Say, if I could play as well as you, I'd be digging ditches right now!"

Seating myself at the piano I held up my hand to command silence. Then, with a good many flourishes I opened "Swanee River," turned it upside down, and began to play.

And how I traveled up and down that keyboard with my one good finger, as Tom called it, until the crowd howled for mercy. Finally I turned around and demanded,

"Now who says I can't play?"

"You win!" came from all sides. "Only please don't demonstrate any more, for the love of heaven!"

But instead of getting up from the piano, I suddenly swung into the haunting strains of "The Pagan Love Song." But with what a difference! This was not clowning, but real music. I played as I had always longed to — beautifully, effortlessly, with real skill and feeling.

No wonder the crowd could hardly believe their ears! The moment the piece was finished they overwhelmed me with questions. *Where had I learned to play? When had I studied? Who was my teacher? Why had I kept it a secret?*

How I Taught Myself to Play

I told them the whole story. Ever since I was a child, I had been crazy about music. But, like most children, I hated to practice. That's why, after a few desultory attempts, my music lessons were given up, and I had to content myself with hearing others play.

But every time I pepped up a party with my one-finger clowning the longing to really play returned. However, I had no time now to take lessons and spend hours practicing, to say nothing of the expense of a private teacher. Then one day I happened to come across an ad of the U. S. School of Music.

"Why, that's a correspondence school, isn't it?" interrupted Tom.

"Yes," I told him. "The ad offered a Free Demonstration Lesson to prove how easy it is to learn to play at home, without a teacher, in one's spare time. I sent for it.

"It was great. I decided to take the course. I learned in my spare time, after work, and thoroughly enjoyed each lesson. For there are no long hours of practice—no tiresome scales — the U. S. School of Music way.

"Almost before I knew it, I was able to play all the pieces I had always longed to play — jazz, classical, *anything*. But I didn't want to tell you folks until I was sure of myself—you know, no clowning. . .

They were dumbfounded. But in a moment they eagerly demanded piece after piece—dance music, ballads, snappy songs. Now I'm never invited anywhere that I'm not practically forced to entertain with my music. As Tom says, learning to *really play* has certainly made me popular!

No Talent Needed

This story is typical. People who once didn't know one note from another are good players today—thanks to the U. S. School of Music.

For the U. S. School course presents everything in such a concise, graphic way—so clear and simple—that a child could understand it. First you are *told* what to do—then a picture *shows* you how to do it—then you do it *yourself* and hear it. No private teacher could make it any clearer.

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Under ordinary conditions of health, the usual morning and night gargle with full strength Listerine is deemed sufficient to assist nature in keeping dangerous disease micro-organisms under control.

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But when infection has actually started as is the case when you have a cold, influenza, grippe, or irritated throat, more frequent gargling is necessary. Once every two hours, authorities urge.

For in ill health body resistance is low. Nature alone can no longer cope with multiplying bacteria. Full strength Listerine with its swift germicidal action then becomes an extra attacking force.

Kills germs in 15 seconds

Exhaustive laboratory tests show that this safe, non-poisonous antiseptic destroys even the Staphylococcus Aureus (pus) and Bacillus Typhosus (typhoid) germs in counts ranging to 200,000,000 in 15 seconds.

Less resistant but no less dangerous pathogens such as the Streptococcus Hemolyticus (the germ associated with sore throat and cold), the Pneumococcus (pneumonia), and the Micrococcus Catarrhalis (catarrh) are destroyed in larger numbers.

Reduces mouth germs 98%

And in the mouth, further tests show that full strength Listerine reduces the bacterial count of saliva 98%. Think of it! In order to maintain a continuous reduction of bacteria, frequent gargling is absolutely necessary. Lambert Pharmacal Company, St. Louis, Mo., U. S. A.

LISTERINE

Sir Basil showed his teeth in his ugly smile. "A creator is never merciful."

Slaves of the Dust

By Sophie Wenzel Ellis

It's a poor science that would hide from us the great, deep, sacred infinitude of Nescience, whither we can never penetrate, on which all science swims as mere superficial film.

—Carlyle.

THE two *batalões* turned from the open waters of the lower Tapajos River into the *igarapé*, the lily-smothered shallows that often mark an Indian settlement in the jungles of Brazil. One of the two half-breed rubber-gatherers suddenly stopped his *batalõe* by thrusting a paddle against a giant clump of lilies. In a corruption of the Tupi dialect, he called over to the white man occupying the other frail craft.

"We dare go no farther, master. The country of the Ungapuks is bewitched. It is too dangerous."

Fearfully he stared over his shoulder toward a

Fate's retribution was adequate. There emerged a rat with a man's head and face.

spot in the slimy water where a dim bulk moved, which was only an alligator hunting for his breakfast.

Hale Oakham, as long and lanky and level-eyed as Charles Lindbergh, ran despairing fingers through his damp hair and groaned.

"But how can I find this jungle village without a guide?"

The *caboclo* shrugged. "The village will find you. It is bewitched, master. But you will soon see the path through the *matto*."

"Can't you stay by me until time to land? I don't like the looks of these alligators."

"It is better for a white man to face an alligator than for a *caboclo* to face an Ungapuk. Once they used to kill and eat us for our strength. Now—" Again his shrug was eloquent.

"Now?" Hale prompted impatiently.

"The white god who put a spell on these one-time cannibals will bewitch us and make us wash and rejoice when it is time to die."

HE shuddered and spat at a cayman that was lumbering away from his *batalõe*.

Hale Oakham laughed, a hearty boyish laugh for a rather learned young professor.

"Is that all they do to you?" he asked.

"No. All who enter this magic *matto* die soon, rejoicing. Before the last breath comes, it is said their bodies turn into a handful of silver dust—poof!—like that." He snapped his dirty fingers. "Then the life that leaves them goes into rocks that walk."

Hale sighed resignedly. There wasn't any use to argue.

"Unload your *batalõe*," he ordered testily, "and get your filthy carcasses away."

The half-breeds obeyed readily. As the departing *batalõe* turned from the *igarapé* into the open water of the river, the young man repressed a sudden lifting of his scalp. He was in for it now!

His long body sprawled out in the *batalõe*, he paddled about aimlessly for several minutes until he found an aisle through the jungle—the path that led to the jungle village which he was visiting in the name of science, and for a certain award.

Before plunging into that waiting tangle where life and death carried on a visible, unceasing struggle, he hesitated. Instinctively he shrank from losing himself in that mad green world.

HE had first heard of the Ungapuks at the convention of the Nescience Club in New York, that body of scientists, near-scientists and adventures linked together for the purpose of awarding the yearly Woolman prizes for the most spectacular addition of empiric facts to various branches of science. One of the members of the club, an explorer, had told a wild yarn about a tribe of Brazilian Indians, headed by Sir Basil Addington, an English scientist, who was conducting secret experiments in biochemistry in his jungle laboratory. The explorer had said that the scientist, half-crazed by a powerful narcotic, had seemingly discovered some secret of life which enabled him to produce monsters in his laboratory and to change the physical characteristics of the Ungapuk Indians, who, in five years, had been transformed from cannibals into cultured men and women.

And now Hale Oakham, hoping to win one of the Woolman prizes, was here in the country of the Ungapuks, entering the jungle path that lead to the unknown.

Fifty feet from the *igarapé*, the path curved sharply away from a giant tree. Hale approached the bend with his hand on his gun. Just before he reached it, he stopped suddenly to listen.

A woman's voice had suddenly broken forth in a wild, incredibly sweet song. Hale stood entranced, drinking in the heady sounds that stirred his emotions like *masata*, the

jungle intoxicant. The singer approached the bend in the path, while the young man waited eagerly.

The first sight of her made him gasp. He had expected to see an Indian girl. No sane traveler would imagine a white woman in the Amazon jungle, with skin as amazingly pale as the great, fleshy victoria regia lilies in the *igarapé*.

When she saw Hale, she stopped instantly. With a quick, practiced twist, she reached for the bow flung across her shoulders and fitted a barbed arrow to the string.

SHE was a beautiful barbarian, standing quivering before him. In the thick dull gold braids hanging over her bare shoulders flamed two enormous scarlet flowers, no redder than her own lips pouted in alarm. There was a savage brevity to her clothing, which consisted only of a short skirt of rough native grass and breastplates of beaten gold, held in place by strings of colored seeds.

The girl held out an imperious hand and, in perfect English, said:

"Go back!"

Hale drew his long body up to its slim height, folded his arms, and gave her his most winning smile. His insolence added to his wholesome good looks.

"Why?" he exclaimed. "I've come a couple of thousand miles to call on you."

He saw that the eyes which held his levelly were pure and limpid, and of an astonishing orchid-blue.

"Who are you?" Her throaty, vibrant voice was a thing of the flesh, whipping Hale's senses to sudden madness.

"I'm Hale Oakham," he said, a little tremulously, "a lone, would-be scientist knocking about the jungle. Won't you tell me your name?"

She nodded gravely. "I am Aña. I, too, am white." Her rich voice was quietly proud. "Come; I'll see if Aimu will receive you."

With surprising, childlike trust, she held out her little hand to him. The gesture was so delightfully natural that Hale, grinning boyishly, took her hand and held it as they walked down the jungle path.

"Sing for me," he demanded abruptly. "Sing the song you sang just now."

"That?" asked the girl, turning the virgin-blue fire of her eyes on him. "That was my death-song that I practice each day. Perhaps soon I shall be released from this." She passed her hands over her beautiful, half-clothed body.

HALE'S warm glance swept over her. "Do you want to die?"

"Yes; don't you? But you do not, or you would not have retreated from my poisoned arrow."

"No, Aña; I want to live."

"To live—and be a slave of *this?*" Again her hand went over her slim body. "A slave of a pile of flesh that you must feed and protect from the agonies that attack it on every side? Bah! But I am hoping that my turn will come next."

"Your turn for what, Aña?"

"To enter the Room of Release. Perhaps, if Aimu approves of you, you, too, may taste of death." Her gentle smile was beatific.

"Do you speak of Sir Basil Addington?"

"He was called that once, before he came to us. Now he has no name. We can find none holy enough for him; and so we call him Aimu, which means good friend." Her beautiful face was sweet with reverence.

And now, in the distance, Hale saw that the path led into a large clearing. He slowed his pace, for he wanted to know this lovely girl better before he joined the Ungapuks.

"Who are you, Aña?" he asked suddenly, bending closer to the crinkled, dull-gold hair.

"I am Aña, a white woman." She looked at him frankly.

"But who are your parents, and how did you get among the Ungapuks?"

Aña's red lips curved into a dewy smile. "I thought all white men were wise, like Aimu. But you are stupid. How do you think a white woman could appear in a tribe of Indians who live in the jungle, many weeks' journey from what you call civilization?"

Hale looked a little blank and more than a little disconcerted.

"I suppose I am stupid," he said dryly. "But tell me, Aña, how did you get here?"

"Why," she exclaimed, "he made me!"

"Made you? Good Lord! What do you mean?"

"Just what I said, Hale Oakham. If he can take a few grains of dust and make a shoot that will grow into a giant tree like yonder monster itauba, don't you think he can create a small white girl like me?" Her orchid-blue eyes glowed innocently into his.

THE eager questions that he would have asked froze upon his lips, for a party of Indians approached.

The six nearly naked red men came close and surveyed him, toying nervously with their primitive, feather-decorated weapons.

A tall, handsome young fellow who possessed something of the picturesque perfection of the North American plains' Indian stepped forward and, in perfect English, said:

"Good morning, white stranger. What is it you wish of the Ungapuks?"

"I came to see your white *cacique*," said Hale.

"Aimu? What is it you wish of Aimu? He is ours, white stranger."

"Yes, he is yours. I come as a friend, perhaps to help him in his great work."

"Perhaps!" The young Indian folded his bronze, muscular arms over his broad chest and continued his cool survey of Hale. "White men before you have come; spies and thieves. Some we poisoned with curari. Others Aimu took into the Room of Release."

He turned to Aña, who was still standing by Hale, and his expression softened.

"What shall we do with him, Aña?" he asked the question, a fleeting look of hunger swept his fine, flashing eyes.

Aña flushed beautifully, and, moving closer to Hale, with an impulsive, almost childish gesture, slipped her arm through his.

"Let us take him to our village, Unani Assu!" she suggested. "I like him."

It was Hale's turn to flush, which he did like a schoolboy.

UNANI ASSU'S brows drew together in a scowl. The hand holding his blow-pipe jerked convulsively.

"Aña! Come away!" he growled. "You mustn't touch a stranger!"

Aña's blue eyes stretched with astonishment. "But I like to touch him, Unani Assu!"

The tall Indian, with a half comical gesture of despair, said:

"Don't misunderstand her, stranger. She is young, very young, ah! And she has known only the reborn men of the Ungapuks."

He stepped firmly over to Aña, and, taking the girl by the arm, drew her away.

"Run ahead," he commanded, "and tell Aimu that we come."

Aña, her feathered bamboo anklets clicking together, sped away.

Unani Assu bowed courteously to Hale.

"Come, stranger. If you are an enemy, it is you who must fear." He motioned for him to proceed down the jungle path.

The path ended at a clearing studded with *moloccas*, the Indian grass huts made of plaited strew. Altogether the scene was peaceful and sane and far removed from the strange tales that Hale had heard concerning the Ungapuks.

Hale was conducted to a long, low stone building, where, in the doorway,

stood a tall and emaciated white man.

"Aimu!" said the Indians reverently, and bowed themselves.

Over the bare, brown backs, the white man looked at Hale.

"Sir Basil Addington?" asked the young man.

"Yes. You are welcome. Come in."

Hale entered the building.

HE was in a book-filled study, furnished with hand-made chairs and a desk. Sir Basil asked him to be seated. He offered the young man long, brown native cigarettes and a very good drink made from yucca.

After several minutes of conversation, Sir Basil suddenly changed his manner.

"And now," he shot out, eyeing the young man through narrowed lids, "will you please state the purpose of this visit?"

Hale looked squarely at his questioner. "Frankly, Sir Basil, I have called on you because I am so intensely interested in your work among the Ungapuks that I wish to offer my services."

He gave in detail his family history, his education, and his experience as a teacher and a scientist.

Sir Basil tapped his teeth thoughtfully with a pencil.

"But why do you think you can be of assistance to me?"

"That, of course, is for you to decide."

Hale thought that the scientist looked like a huge, starved crow in his loose-fitting coat. He was so fleshless that, when the light fell strongly on his face as it now did, the bones of his head and hands showed through the skin with horrible clearness.

Hale, under Sir Basil's scrutiny, decided instantly that he did not like him.

"I need a helper," the scientist went on, with the air of talking to himself. "A white assistant who neither loves nor fears me. Unani Assu is good enough in his way, but I need a helper who has had technical training." Suddenly he wheeled on Hale and asked sharply. "How are your nerves, young man?"

HALE started, but managed to answer calmly. "Excellent. My war record isn't half bad, and that was surely backed with good nerves."

"And you say you have no close relatives, no ties of any sort to interfere with work that is dangerous—and something else?"

"Not a soul would care if I passed out to-day, Sir Basil."

"Good! And now tell me this: are you one of those scientists whose minds are so mechanical, so mathematically made, as it were, that your entire outlook on science is based on old, established beliefs, or do you belong to that rare but modern type of trained thinker and dreamer who refuse to permit yesterday's convictions to influence to-day's visions?"

Hale smiled quietly. "I recently lost my chair in a famous university because of my so-called unscientific teachings regarding ether-drift."

Expressing himself in purely scientific terms, he went into an elaboration of his revolutionary theory. When he had finished, Sir Basil reached out his clawlike hand to him.

"Good!" he approved. "You have dared to think originally. Now listen to my theory of mind-electrons which has grown into the established fact that I have discovered the secret of life and death."

The long, thin hands reached into a pocket for a box of pills. He swallowed one greedily, and immediately his emaciated face seemed charged with new virility.

He spoke out suddenly. "Our world, you know, is made up of three powers: matter, energy and what you call life. I might really say that there are but two powers, for matter, in its last analysis, is a form of energy. And what is life? You can't call it a form of energy, for every inorganic atom has

energy without having life. Life, Mr. Oakham, is mind or consciousness."

He began pacing the floor restlessly. "Everything that lives has this consciousness, and I say this in defiance of some fixed scientific views. The amoeba in a stagnant pool, a thallophyte on a bit of old bread, any of the myriads of trees and plants that you see in the jungle all have consciousness as well as you. And why?"

HE brought his fist down upon the table. "Because they issue from the same source as you and I, the almighty mind, eternal, indestructible, which has permitted itself to be enslaved by matter. You are Hale Oakham. I am Basil Addington, yet we are one and the same. Let me illustrate."

He seized a glass and poured it full of *masata*. "Look! Two portions of *masata*. But I pour what is in the glass back into the bottle. The molecules cohere and the two portions become one again. Some day you and I—our individual consciousnesses—will flow back to the Whole. That sounds mystical, but listen.

"We scientists hold that the electron explains nearly all the physical and chemical phenomena. I go further and say that it explains *all*. Matter, electricity, light, heat, magnetism—all can be reduced to the ultimate unit. So, Mr. Oakham, I am going to make clear to you how life itself is electronic."

His long finger touched Hale's arm. "You, I, yonder mosquito on your sleeve, even one of the germs that is causing my malaria, all being individual living things, are the ultimate units of what I shall personify as the Mind. When I say *you* I do not speak of that mound of flesh in which you exist, and which can be reduced to the same familiar basic elements and compounds as make up inorganic structures; I speak of your mind, your consciousness—for that is the real you. Are you following me?"

"Perfectly, Sir Basil." Hale reached for another drink. "But do you mean to say that you and I are no more than a mosquito, a malaria protozoan, or even one of those trees in the jungle?"

Sir Basil's dry skin slipped back into a long smile. "Startling, isn't it? You, I, and all other living organisms are nothing but matter, energy and consciousness. You and I have a larger share of consciousness, because our organic structure permits the mind-electrons greater freedom over the matter than composes our bodies. We are more acutely aware of the universe about us, have a greater facility for enjoyment and suffering, a more intricate brain and nervous system. Yet when our bodies die and our consciousness is released, the mind-electrons enslaved by our atoms go back to the elemental Whole. This holds good for the protozoan, the tree, the man—for all things that live."

HALE was drinking again. "You mean, Sir Basil, that there is a sort of war waged against what you personify as the Mind by matter; that matter is constantly seeking to enslave mind-electrons, so that it may become an organism which, for awhile, may enjoy what we call life?"

Sir Basil pushed back his tuffed hair and looked happy. "Yes! And it's Nature's supreme blunder! In the end, the Mind always conquers and gains its release, yet the eternal chain of enslavement goes on and on, and will continue to go on as long as there is a living organism in the world to bind mind to matter."

Hale was excited now, as much from the fiery intoxicant as from the scientist's weird revelation. "I get you," he said, rather inelegantly for a professor. "You mean that if every living thing in the world should pass out, every man, every plant, every animal, even down to microscopic infusoria, the Mind would collect all its electrons, and through some more jealous law of, er, cohesion hold these electrons inviolate from matter and energy?"

"Right! And again, as in the beginning, the Mind would rule supreme. By what I have proved, you and I and all other creatures that now have life may, as separate unfleshed electrons, enjoy eternal consciousness as a part of the Mind." A new passion leaped to his dark eyes. "When I have finished my mission, no more need we be slaves of the dust, subject to all the frightful sufferings of this dunghill of flesh."

He brought his fist down upon his skinny leg with a resounding blow.

"But you cannot reduce your theory to fact, Sir Basil!"

"No?" Again came that frightful grin to his cadaverous face. "Can you withstand shock?"

"If you mean shock to the eye, let me remind you that I served two years in the big fight."

"Then come to my laboratory. Better take another drink."

While Hale helped himself again from the *masata* bottle, Sir Basil swallowed another pellet.

Then the two went into the adjoining apartment.

SIR BASIL, his hand over the door-knob, paused.

"Before we go in," he said, "I want you to remember that we call natural that which is characteristic of the physical world. Everything alive in this laboratory was produced by nature. I merely made available the materials, or, rather, I made the conditions under which matter was able to enslave mind-electrons."

He opened the door, slipped his body through, and, with his ugly, teeth-revealing grin, gestured for Hale to follow him.

Hale steeled himself and looked around half fearfully. The first glance took in a large and well-equipped laboratory, somewhat fetid with animal odors. The second lingered here and there on cages, aquariums, incubators, and other containers where creatures moved.

Suddenly, as something scuttled across the floor and disappeared into a hole in the wall, Hale cried out and covered his eyes with a hand.

Sir Basil laughed aloud. "Why didn't you examine it closer?"

Hale looked nauseated. "My God, Sir Basil! A rat with a man's head and face!"

Sir Basil's voice was sharp, decisive. "Before you leave this laboratory, you're going to come out of your foolish belief that man is a creature apart from other living organisms. You—the conscious you—is no greater, no more important in the final balance than the spark of consciousness in that rat. When your body and the rat's body give up their atoms to nature's laboratory, the little enslaved mind-electron that is you and the one that is the rat will be identical."

Again Hale shivered and turned away from that cold, too-thin face.

The scientist was speaking. "Step around to all those cages and pens. I want you to see all my slaves of the dust."

BUT long before Hale had encircled the room, he was so disturbed at what he saw that he could scarcely complete his frightful inspection. In every enclosure he viewed a monstrosity that in some way resembled a human. Every reptile, every insect, every queer, misshapen animal not only looked human in some shocking manner, but also seemed to possess human characteristics. It seemed as though some demented creator with a perverted sense of humor had attempted to mock man by calling forth monsters in his image.

At last the young man cried out: "How did you breed these freaks?"

"They are not freaks, and I did not breed them. They are nature's parentless products whose basic elements were brought together in this laboratory, and, by a scientific reproduction of the functions of creation, endowed with the life principle, which is merely

mind-electrons." He smoothed his long tuft of hair nervously. "Would you like to see how life springs from a wedding of matter, energy, and consciousness?"

"I suspect I can stand anything now," Hale admitted.

"Then come and peep into a very remarkable group of apparatus I have developed, where you can watch atoms building molecules and molecules building living organisms."

"You say I can see atoms?"

"Not directly, of course. The light waves will forever prevent us from actually seeing the atom. But I have perfected a system of photography which magnifies particles smaller than light waves, and, separating their images from the light waves, renders detail clear in the moving pictures."

HE went to a huge machine or series of machines which took up all the center floor space of the laboratory, where he busied himself in an intricate network of wires, mirrors, electrodes, ray projectors, and traveling metal compartments. Presently he called out to Hale.

"Let me remind you, Oakham, that while any scientist can break up any of the various proteid molecules which are the basis of all living cells, animal and vegetable, no scientist before me has been able to compound the atoms and build them into a proteid molecule."

He bared his teeth in the smile that Hale hated.

"I am proud to tell you that the proteid molecule can be built up only when the third element of nature's trinity is added—the mind-electron. I have found a means of capturing the mind-electron and of bringing it in contact with proteid elements. And now it is possible to bring forth life in the laboratory. Come closer and watch proteid forming protoplasm, protoplasm forming a cell, and the cell evolving into—well, what do you want, an animal, plant, or an insect?"

Hale had fallen under the scientist's spell. He did not feel foolish when he said:

"Let's have a rat!"

HALE became so absorbed in the wonders of the laboratory that when lunch time came, Sir Basil had food brought to them. While they were eating a very good vegetable stew, farina, and luscious tropical fruits, a sudden, agonized scream rang out, followed by other screams and wails.

Sir Basil opened the door and looked out. Aña came running forward. Her blue eyes were flooded with tears.

"Oh, Aimu!" she moaned. "A tree fell on Unani Assu."

She buried her beautiful face in her hands and sobbed aloud.

Sir Basil frowned heavily.

"I can't lose Unani Assu yet," he declared. "He is a wonderful help around the laboratory. Is he dead?"

"No. We should rejoice if his time of release had come. But his legs, Aimu! No one wants to suffer and be crippled."

Even in her distress, the girl's voice was rich and vibrant, and every tone moved Hale curiously.

"Hurry!" cried the scientist. "Have them bring him here before he dies."

The girl leaped to her feet and sped away.

"Come, Oakham," continued Sir Basil. "Here is a rare opportunity for you to see how completely I have mastered the laws that govern organic matter. Help me prepare."

FOR several minutes, Hale worked under the scientist's sharply spoken directions. By the time the injured man was brought to the laboratory, Sir Basil was ready for him.

Unani Assu was still conscious, but his pale face indicated that he had lost much blood. When the improvised stretcher was lowered to the floor, Sir Basil sent all the Indians away.

Unani Assu opened his eyes and called feebly, "Aña!"

"Be still!" ordered Sir Basil. "Aña is not here."

"Please!" gasped the dying man. "I want her—my Aña!"

Sir Basil sucked in his breath sharply. "What's this? Have you been making love to Aña again, after my warning to you?"

The sufferer stirred uneasily. "No!" he panted. "But perhaps my hour of release has come, and I want to look at her—once more."

The scientist smiled unpleasantly as he eyed the magnificent body which looked like a broken statue in bronze.

"Some human characteristics are strange," he muttered. "In spite of everything I do, this fellow continues to love Aña: Aña whom I intend for myself."

He stepped to the apparatus and swiftly changed one of the adjustments.

"Perhaps," he resumed, with a gleam in his eyes that chilled Hale, "this will forever cure him."

IN another moment, the still, half-dead body was lifted and gently slipped into a compartment.

Before Hale's horrified gaze fastened on the eye-piece which revealed moving pictures of every process that went on within, Unani Assu's body was reduced almost instantly to a fine, silvery dust.

"Good God!" he cried. "You have killed him."

The scientist's teeth showed in his wide smile. "Think so? Does a woman destroy a dress when she rips it up to make it over?"

"Do you mean me to understand that you can reduce a living body to its basic elements and then rebuild these elements into a remade man?"

"Watch!" warned the scientist.

Hale looked again and saw the silver dust that was once a living body being whirled into a tiny, grublike thing. He saw the grub expand into an embryo, and the embryo develop into a foetus. From now on the development was slower, and he often stopped to talk with Sir Basil.

Once he asked: "If this man had died naturally, could you have brought him back to life?"

Sir Basil shook his head. "No. When once the mind-electron is completely freed from its enslavement by matter, it is forever beyond recall by the body it has just vacated. Like atomic electrons, whose equilibrium disturbed break away from their planetary system and go dashing off into space, only to be drawn into another planetary system, the mind-electron may be enslaved almost immediately by extraneous matter. Had Unani Assu died, his liberated mind-electron might at once have been captured by a jungle flower going to seed. Immediately a new seed would be started. And now the former Unani Assu would be a seed of a jungle flower, later to find new life as a plant."

Suddenly the scientist threw up his hand and cried: "You see? The Mind will be eternally enslaved as long as there is life! Oh, for the time of deliverance!" He gazed fanatically into space, as though he dreamed magnificently.

Hale observed him thoughtfully. When that great brain weakened, the consequences would be frightful.

SIR BASIL, as though he had made a sudden decision, went over to that part of his machine which he called the molecule-disintegrator.

"Oakham!" he called out. "I have taken you partly into my confidence. Now I want to show you something. Come here."

Hale obeyed with misgivings. The scientist pointed out the window to a group of Indians, anxious relatives of Unani Assu.

"Watch!" he ordered.

Turning one of the projectors on the machine toward the window, he sighted carefully and pressed a button.

Immediately one of the Indians fell to the ground and struggled. His com-

panions began dancing around him in evident joy. Faintly to the laboratory came a familiar chant, which Hale recognized as Aña's death song.

Dust to dust
Mind to Mind—
He will shed his body
As the green snake sheds his skin.

As Hale watched, the struggling Indian's body seemed to shrink, and then, instantly, it disappeared.

"Watch them scatter the dust!" said the scientist.

One of the Indians stooped and blew upon the grass.

"What have you done!" Hale gasped. "You've killed this one. Oh, I see now! These poor devils are totally ignorant that you are killing them for practice. They worship you while you turn them to—silver dust!" He turned angrily on the scientist as though he longed to strike him.

"Keep cool, young man!" Sir Basil held up his fleshless hand. "There is no death! Change, yes; but no permanent blotting out of consciousness. Can't you see the horror of it as nature works? When your time for release comes, as it inevitably will, your mind-electron might find new enslavement in a worm!"

HALE'S reply came hotly. "If that is true, why do you murder these poor devils deliberately!"

"My dear Oakham, perhaps you are not so brilliant as I had hoped! All that I have done thus far is only child's play, in preparation for my real work. Haven't you guessed by now what I am getting ready to do?"

"No; I'm a poor guesser."

The scientist made a gesture of mock despair. "Then let me tell you. The molecule-disintegrator is active only on organic structures. When I concentrate it so"—he reached out again, sighted the projector on some point beyond the window, and pressed a button—"one single living organism passes out. See that jupati tree by the rock disappear?"

Before Hale's eyes, the tall, slender tree melted into air.

"But," continued Sir Basil, "if I should *broadcast* my molecule-disintegrator on electron-magnetic waves, destruction would pass out in all directions, following the curve of the earth's surface, penetrating earth, air, water." He wet his lips carefully. "You understand?"

Hale stiffened suddenly. "I understand. No life could survive these vibrations of destruction? Through every corner of the earth where life lurks, they would reach?"

"Yes!" cried Sir Basil. "There would be not a blade of grass, not a living spore, not a hidden egg! Think of it, Oakham! No more would the clean air and the sweet earth reek with life, and at last the ultimate mind-electron would be released forever."

He was breathing fast, and his emaciated face burned with two red spots.

Hale thought rapidly. He was convinced now that the fate of all life lay within that diabolical network of chemical apparatus.

At last he said: "And what of you and I, Sir Basil? Shall we, too, be caught in this wholesale destruction?"

"Not immediately," replied the scientist. "Of course, I want to remain in the flesh long enough to be sure that my purpose has been accomplished. I have provided a way for my own safety. If you desire, you may remain with me." He smiled craftily. "I have planned to keep Aña also, the woman whom I called into life and made as I wished."

HIS words pounded against Hale's tortured ears with almost physical force. With a supreme effort, the young man controlled his rage and despair. Aña needed him too much now for him to risk defeat by showing his emotions.

To Sir Basil he said: "But if all life disappears from the earth, what shall

we do for food—you, Aña, and I?"

Sir Basil lifted his brows. "You don't think I overlooked that, do you? What is food? Various combinations of the basic elements. I who have conquered the atom need never worry about starving to death."

All this time, the machinery had been humming, and now the humming changed its note to a shrill whistle. Sir Basil went to the eye-piece and looked into it. Opening a door in the machinery, he disappeared inside. He came out soon, flushed and evidently elated.

"Bring the stretcher, Oakham," he ordered.

Hale brought the stretcher, placing it close to the machine. Then Sir Basil opened a metal door and gently eased out a human body.

It was Unani Assu, unconscious but alive and breathing. Hale, helping the scientist to get the man on the stretcher, noticed that the crushed legs were perfectly healed. Together they bore him to a long seat. The Indian's eyes were still closed, but his even breathing indicated that he was only sleeping.

Suddenly Hale pointed a finger and cried out. "My God, Sir Basil, look at his hands and feet!"

UNANI ASSU, still lying like a recumbent bronze statue sculptured by a master, was perfect from shoulder to wrist, from thigh to ankle. But, somewhere in that diabolical machine through which he had passed, his hands and feet had undergone a hideous metamorphism which had transformed them from the well-formed extremities of a splendid young Indian into the hairy paws of a giant rat!

Hale turned away his head, sick with disgust.

Sir Basil cut the silence triumphantly:

"Now he'll never again face Aña with love in his eyes!"

"What!" broke in Hale. "Did you plan this monstrous thing?"

"Of course! I told you I should forever cure him of his mad infatuation."

"But why didn't you kill him, as you killed the others? It would have been the most merciful way."

Sir Basil showed his teeth in his ugly smile. "A creator is never merciful."

A quiver passed through the Indian's body and, presently, he sighed deeply and opened his eyes. He seemed dazed, puzzled. He looked from Hale to the scientist, and turned seeking eyes to other parts of the laboratory.

"Aña!" he called weakly. "Where is Aña?"

He pulled himself a little unsteadily to his feet—to the spatulated, hairy *rodent* feet that had come out of the life-machine. Staggering, he would have fallen, had he not thrown out his arm to steady himself. Instinctively he tried to grasp something for support, and then, for the first time, he discovered his deformity.

HALE was never to forget that expression of horror and disgust that swept over the Indian's face as he spread open his revolting extremities and stared at them.

A sudden, wild roar of despair rang through the room. "Aimu! My hands!"

The scientist smiled with evident amusement. "You are a grotesque sight, Unani Assu. Do you want to see Aña now?"

The fright and horror faded from the Indian's face, for now he glared with hate into the mad, mocking eyes.

"You did it!" the Indian ground out. "You've made me into a thing from which Aña will run screaming."

Through the quiet rage of the perfectly spoken English ran a thread of sorrow. "Aimu, whom we considered too holy to name!"

Choking, he hobbled away to the door, which he unbolted. As he passed out into the open, Sir Basil went over to the machine and began sighting the projector which cast forth the ray of destruction.

"No!" cried Hale. "You've done enough murder for to-day."

The scientist paused. "I was trying to be merciful. And then, I wonder if it is safe to let him go, hating me? Oh, well!" He shrugged his narrow shoulders. "I seldom leave the laboratory, and certainly nothing can harm me here." He touched the death-projector significantly.

Hale made a mental decision. "I must find out how the damned thing works and put it out of commission."

WITH this determination uppermost in his mind, he assumed a more intense interest in the strange laboratory. For the next two days, he assisted Sir Basil so assiduously that he learned much about the operation of the life-machine. And gradually he stopped being horrified as the fascination of producing life in the laboratory grew upon him.

After he had assisted the scientist in building living organisms from basic elements, he ceased to cringe when he remembered that perhaps it was true that Aña was created in the mysterious life-machine.

Once the scientist declared, "She is untainted with inheritance. She is the perfect mate that I called into life so that before I pass from the flesh I may taste that one human emotion I've never experienced—love."

That very night Hale kept a secret tryst with Aña after the village slept. Sweet, virginal Aña, who knew less of the world than a civilized child of twelve—what a sensation she would create in New York with her beauty, her culture, her natural fascination! With her in his arms and an orange tropical moon hanging low in the hot, black sky, he ceased to care that she had no ancestors, for now his one passionate desire was to save her from Sir Basil and to hold her forever for himself.

He might have been content to go on like this for months, tampering with creation in the day time, courting Aña in secret at night, had not Unani Assu come back for revenge.

ON the fourth night after Unani Assu had disappeared into the jungle, Hale went to the *igarapé* to meet Aña. He had gone only half the distance when he encountered her, running frantically up the path toward him.

"Hale!" she gasped, falling into his opened arms, where she lay panting and exhausted.

Hale gently patted the long braids, shimmering in silver tangles under the moonlight, and, crushing the soft little trembling body close, he murmured:

"What's the matter, darling?"

She dug her face deeper into the bend of his arm. "Oh, Hale! I saw Unani Assu a few minutes ago." For several moments she was unable to go on, for sudden sobs cut off her breath. "It's terrible, Hale, what Aimu did to his hands and feet, but what Unani's going to do to Aimu is still more terrible."

Hale placed his hand gently under her chin and tilted up her small, pale, tear-drenched face.

"Be calm, Aña, and tell me plainly."

Still clinging to him, she went on. "He told me that Aimu is a devil, Hale. He showed me his hands and asked me if I could ever get used to them and be—his squaw." The round gold breastplates and the necklace of painted seeds clinked together over her panting bosom. "I told him about you, Hale. And then he seemed to go mad. He said he'd kill Aimu to-night."

"But, Aña! Why did he let you go, knowing that you would give the alarm?"

"He didn't let me go." Her petaled lips parted in a faint smile. "I escaped. Unani Assu tied me to a tree by the *igarapé*. Because he doesn't hate me, he could not bear to tie me too tightly."

"Then he must be close to the laboratory now. If he breaks in upon Aimu—oh, my God!"

Hale remembered the death-projector. If Sir Basil were in danger of attack, he would not hesitate to touch the

waiting button that would broadcast death throughout the world.

He seized Aña's little hand and cried out: "Run, Aña! The only safe place now is Aimu's laboratory. Run!"

AS they dashed on madly, Hale opened wide his nostrils to scent the heavy, flower-laden air of the jungle. Any moment all this sweet, rich life might vanish instantly. He had a horrible vision of a world devoid of life, a world of bare rocks, dry sand, odorless, dead waters. For it was life that greened the landscape, roughened the stones with moss and lichen, thickened the ocean with ooze, and turned the dry sand into loam—life that swarmed underfoot, overhead, all around!

And now, just as they reached the laboratory door, panting and frantic, a hoarse shriek broke forth. Dragging Aña after him, Hale dashed forward, conscious of two masculine voices raised in passion.

The door to the room where the life-machine performed its vile work was locked. Hale pounded against it and called out to Sir Basil, but only curses and the sound of tumbling bodies came from beyond the door. Although originally the door had been thick and strong, the destructive forces of the tropics had pitted and rotted the wood. A few blows of Hale's shoulder broke it down.

Under the brilliant electric light, Sir Basil and Unani Assu were fighting upon the blood-spattered floor. The struggle was uneven: the scientist's emaciated body was no match for the splendid strength of the young Indian.

"Help Aimu!" cried Aña, pushing Hale forward.

Aimu was being choked to death.

Hale acted fantastically but efficiently. Catching up a bottle of ammonia, he moistened a handkerchief and clapped it against Unani Assu's nose. Instantly the Indian choked, released Sir Basil, and fell back, gasping for breath.

Hale thrust the handkerchief into his pocket.

"Get out!" he ordered Unani Assu. "Quick!" He threatened him with the ammonia bottle.

But Unani Assu was not looking at the bottle. "Aimu!" he screamed, pointing.

WHEN Hale saw and understood, he leaped across the room to plant his body in front of Aña; for Sir Basil was behind the life-machine, reaching for the controls of the ray projector.

Suddenly, from behind Hale, a silver streak shot across the room. Sir Basil groaned and sank to the floor of the laboratory.

A keen-bladed dissecting knife, thrown by Aña, stuck out from his left breast.

Aña ran forward, sobbing wildly. "Oh, Aimu! I'm sorry! I didn't mean for it to strike you there. Only your hand, Aimu! I didn't want Hale to die, Aimu. I didn't—oh!"

She was on her knees by the scientist's side, his head held in her slender arms.

"He's breathing!" she rejoiced. Some *masata*, Hale, quick!"

Hale found a bottle of good brandy which he had contributed from his own supplies. Soon Sir Basil gasped and opened his eyes. He stared about him wildly, then gasped:

"I'm dying, Hale Oakham! Quick, the life-machine, before my mind-electron escapes."

He tried to pull his body up, but fell back, weak and panting.

Hale hesitated, looking doubtfully at Aña.

"For God's sake, quick!" screamed Sir Basil. "I'm dying, I say! I must have—rebirth. Lift me to the disintegrator. Hurry! . ." His voice trailed off faintly.

"He is dying," snapped Hale. "We might as well try it." He jerked open the door to the disintegrator. "Here, Unani Assu! Lend a hand!"

INSTANTLY the Indian came forward, a peculiar, pleased expression on his handsome face. In a moment, Sir Basil's body was inside, and the machine began its weird humming, the humming that indicated the transformation of a human body into dust.

"Now!" cried Unani Assu exultingly, going behind the machine. "I have helped him enough to understand that if one changes this—and this—and this"—he made some rapid adjustments on the machine—"something that is not pleasant will happen."

"Stop!" cried Hale. "What did you change?"

The Indian laughed mockingly. "Wouldn't you like to know? But, yet, you should not worry. You have no cause to love him, have you?"

"I can't be a traitor, Unani Assu! Arrange the machine as it was originally, and I give you my word of honor than when Sir Basil comes out, I'll wreck the damned thing beyond repair. See, Unani Assu? You and I together will smash it."

The Indian folded his arms so that the repulsive things that should have been hands were hidden.

"It's too late now," he admitted, shaking his head. "Yet I've done no more to him than he did to me."

Hale went to the eye-piece in the machine and started to look inside. Unani Assu stepped forward, tapped him on the shoulder, and, fingering significantly the dissecting knife which he had picked up, said:

"I am operating the machine. Will you sit over there by Aña and wait? It won't be long. And, white stranger, remember this: I am your friend. I am turned against none but our common enemy." He pointed significantly to the machine.

TWO hours passed, long, silent hours for the watchers in the laboratory. Aña fell asleep, in a sweet, childish bundle upon the piled cushions, her golden hair, still decorated with the red flowers which she always wore, crushed and withered now. Several times Hale caught Unani Assu gazing at her sadly, and his own look saddened when it rested on the Indian's strong, outraged body.

The humming of the machine changed to a whistle. Placing his fingers on his lips in a signal of quiet, Unani Assu whispered:

"Let Aña sleep. She mustn't see this."

Opening a door in the machine, his handsome face lighted with a grim smile, he whispered exultingly:

"Watch!"

A scuttling sound issued forth and then, half drunkenly, an enormous rat tumbled out—one of those horrible rats with the hairless, humanlike faces that had so frequently come from the life-machine.

Hale could not crush back the cry that issued from his throat.

"Where is Sir Basil?" he gasped.

"There!" cried the Indian, pointing to the kicking rat, which was fast gaining strength.

HALE staggered back. "No! You don't mean it, do you?"

Unani Assu turned the rat over with a contemptuous toe. "Yes, I mean it. Behold Aimu, the man who thought himself creator and destroyer—the man who said that a human being was no higher than a rat! Perhaps he was right, for see this thing that was once a man!"

Hale buried his face in his hands. "Kill it, Unani Assu! Kill it!"

Unani Assu's low laugh was metallic. "You kill it."

Hale uncovered his face. "Open the disintegrator." Gingerly he reached for the rat's tail.

But his hand never touched the animal. The hairless face turned for a second, and the little, beady eyes blinked up at Hale with an expression that his fevered imagination thought almost human. Then, like a dark shadow, the rat dashed away. Once around the room it scampered, hunting

for an exit. Hale started in pursuit. He was almost upon the animal again, when, leaping up from his grasp, it landed on a low shelf where chemicals were stored. Several bottles fell, filling the room with fumes.

Another bottle fell, and, suddenly, amid a thunderous roar, the ceiling and walls began falling. Some highly explosive chemical had been stored in one of the bottles.

Hale was thrown violently against the couch. His hand touched Aña's body. One last shred of consciousness enabled him to pick her up and drag her out. In the open, he fell, aware, before blackness descended, that flames leaped high over the laboratory building and that Unani Assu lay dead within.

HALE and Aña, leaning over the deck-rail of a small steam launch, gazed into the dark waters of the Amazon.

"We ought to reach Para by morning," said Hale, "and then, dearest, we're off for New York!"

Aña, wearing one of the first civilized dresses she had ever donned, and looking as smart as any débutante, slipped her little hand into her husband's.

"Isn't it a shame, Hale," she moaned, "that the fire burned all the animals and insects, the machinery, and even your notes?" Her beautiful face saddened. "Just one or two specimens might have been proof enough for your What-You-Call-It Club!"

"The Nescience Club, darling. No, I can't expect to win the Woolman prize, but I've won a prize worth far more." He squeezed her little hand and looked devotedly into her blue eyes. "And, Aña, I've reasoned out something concerning mind-electrons which even Sir Basil overlooked."

"What is it, Hale?"

"He maintained that matter seeks always to enslave mind-electrons, but I am convinced that mind-electrons seek to enslave matter. Understand? It's creation, Aña! Had Sir Basil succeeded in broadcasting death throughout the world, the freed mind-electrons, as in the beginning, would have started again to vitalize inorganic atoms. And, in a few million years, which is no time to the Mind, the world would be humming with a new civilization. Large thought, eh, sweetheart?"

A SIGNAL TO THE MOON

THE idea of a radio signal to the moon may sound fantastic, but is easily within the range of possibility, says Dr. A. Hoyt Taylor, Chief of the Radio Division of the United States Naval Research Laboratories at Washington, who plans such an attempt in the near future.

"We have reason to expect a good chance of getting the signal back in a time interval of slightly less than three seconds," said Dr. Taylor.

To be exact, a radio signal should be reflected back to earth in a time interval of 2.8 seconds, this being the necessary elapsed time for it to carry the 250,000 miles to the moon and return at its speed of 300,000 kilometers, or 186,000 miles per second.

The signal would be very weak, Dr. Taylor points out, but not impossible of detection with the present refinement of receiving instruments, provided no great absorption took place in interstellar space.

A high frequency wave will be used, as such a wave penetrates readily the earth's atmosphere and probably goes far beyond. The frequency of the wave will range between 20,000 and 30,000 kilocycles. Twenty kilowats of power will be used, enough to furnish current for about forty flatirons.

The value of a radio signal to the moon lies in the confirmation of whether there is or not heavy absorption of waves in the upper levels of our own atmosphere. If successful it would indicate a reasonably good reflection coefficient at the surface of the moon—the power of the moon's surface to act as a joint agent in the perfection of the signal.

The signal might have some bearing also on whether the moon has an atmosphere—something pretty much settled already by astronomical observation. It would also lead to the possibility of fairly accurate determination of wave velocity in free space, all of interest to science, either confirming existing theories or establishing new ones.

The Pirate Planet

PART TWO OF A FOUR-PART NOVEL

By Charles W. Diffin

WHAT HAS GONE BEFORE

A FLASH of light on Venus!—and at Maricopa Flying Field Lieutenant McGuire and Captain Blake laugh at its possible meaning until the radio's weird call and the sight of a giant ship in the night sky prove their wildest thoughts are facts. "Big as an ocean liner," it hangs in mid-air, then turns and shoots upward at incredible speed until it disappears entirely, in space!

It is war. Interplanetary war. And on far-distant Venus two fighting Earthlings stand up against a whole planet run amuck.

McGuire goes to Mount Lawson observatory, and there he sees the flash on Venus repeated. Professor Sykes, who had observed the first flash, confirms it and sees still more. He sees

"Hold them off as long as you can!"

the enveloping clouds of Venus torn asunder, and beneath them an identifying mark, a continent shaped like the letter "L."

And then the great ship comes again. It hovers above the observatory and settles slowly down.

Back at Maricopa Field, Captain Blake has tested a new plane for altitude, and is now prepared to interview the stranger in the higher levels. McGuire's frantic phone call sends him out into the night with the 91st Squadron of planes in support. It is their last flight, for all but Blake. The invader smothers them in a great sphere of gas, but Blake, with his oxygen flasks, flies through to crash beside the observatory. Only Blake survives to see the enemy land, while strange man-

shapes loot the buildings and carry off McGuire and Sykes.

A bombardment with giant shells dispels the last doubt of the earth being under attack. The flashes from Venus at regular intervals spout death and destruction upon the earth; a mammoth gun, sunk into the planet itself, bears once upon the earth at every revolution, until the changing position of the globes take the target out of range.

In less than a year and a half the planets must meet again. It is war to the death; a united world against an enemy unknown—an enemy who has conquered space. And there is less than a year and a half in which to prepare!

Far out in the blackness of space McGuire and Sykes are captives in the giant ship. Their stupor leaves them; they find themselves immersed in clouds. The clouds part; their ship drops through; and below them is a strange continent shaped like the letter "L." Captives of inhuman but man-shaped things, they are landing upon a strange globe—upon the planet Venus itself!

CHAPTER VIII

MILES underneath the great ship, from which Lieutenant McGuire and Professor Sykes were now watching through a floor-window of thick glass, was a glittering expanse of water—a great ocean. The flickering gold expanse that reflected back the color of the sun-lit clouds passed to one side as the ship took its station above the island, a continent in size, that had shown by its shape like a sharply formed "L" an identifying mark to the astronomer.

They were high in the air; the thick clouds that surrounded this new world were miles from its surface, and the things of the world that awaited were tiny and blurred.

Airships passed and repassed far below. Large, some of them—as bulky as the transport they were on; others were small flashing cylinders, but all went swiftly on their way.

It must have come—some ethereal vibration to warn others from the path—for layer after layer of craft were cleared for the descent. A brilliant light flashed into view, a dazzling pin-point on the shore below, and the great ship fell suddenly beneath them. Swiftly it dropped down the pathway of light; on even keel it fell down and still down, till McGuire, despite his experience in the air, was sick and giddy.

The light blinked out at their approach. It was some minutes before the watching eyes recovered from the brilliance to see what mysteries might await, and then the surface was close and the range of vision small.

A vast open space—a great court paved with blocks of black and white—a landing field, perhaps, for about it in regular spacing other huge cylinders were moored. Directly beneath in a clear space was a giant cradle of curved arms; it was a mammoth structure, and the men knew at a glance that this was the bed where their great ship would lie.

THE smooth pavement seemed slowly rising to meet them as their ship settled close. Now the cradle was below, its arms curved and waiting. The ship entered their grasp, and the arms widened, then closed to draw the monster to its rest. Their motion ceased. They were finally, beyond the last faint doubt, at anchor on a distant world.

A shrill cackle of sound recalled them from the thrill of this adventure, and the attenuated and lanky figure, with its ashen, blotchy face that glared at them from the doorway, reminded them that this excursion into space was none of their desire. They were prisoners—captives from a foreign land.

A long hand moved its sinuous fingers to motion them to follow, and

McGuire regarded his companion with a hopeless look and a despondent shrug of his shoulders.

"No use putting up a fight," he said; "I guess we'd better be good."

He followed where the figure was stepping through a doorway into a corridor beyond. They moved, silent and depressed, along the dimly lighted way; the touch of cold metal walls was as chilling to their spirits as to their flesh.

But the mood could not last: the first ray of light from the outside world sent shivers of anticipation along their spines. They were landing, in very fact, upon a new world; their feet were to walk where never man had stood; their eyes would see what mortal eyes had never visioned.

Fears were forgotten, and the men clung to each other not for the human touch but because of an ecstasy of intoxicating, soul-filling joy in the sheer thrill of adventure.

They were gripping each other's hand, round-eyed as a couple of children, as they stepped forward into the light.

BEFORE them was a scene whose blazing beauty of color struck them to frozen silence; their exclamations of wonder died unspoken on their lips. They were in a city of the stars, and to their eyes it seemed as if all the brilliance of the heavens had been gathered for its building.

The spacious, open court itself stood high in the air among the masses of masonry, and beyond were countless structures. Some towered skyward; others were lower; and all were topped with bulbous towers and graceful minarets that made a forest of gleaming opal light. Opalescence everywhere!—it flashed in red and gold and delicate blues from every wall and cornice and roof.

"Quartz?" marveled Sykes after one long drawn breath. "Quartz or glass?—what are they made of? It is fairyland!"

A jewelled city! Garish, it might have been, and tawdry, in the full light of the sun. But on these weirdly unreal structures the sun's rays never shone; they were illumined only by the soft golden glow that diffused across this world from the cloud masses far above.

McGuire looked up at that uniform, glowing, golden mass that paled toward the horizon and faded to the gray of banked clouds. His eyes came slowly back to the ramp that led downward to the checkered black and white of the court. Beyond an open portion the pavement was solidly massed with people.

"People!—we might as well call them that," McGuire had told Sykes; "they are people of a sort, I suppose. We'll have to give them credit for brains: they've beaten us a hundred years in their inventions."

He was trying to see everything, understand everything, at once. There was not time to single out the new impressions that were crowding upon him. The air—it was warm to the point of discomfort; it explained the loose, light garments of the people; it came to the two men laden with strange scents and stranger sounds.

McGuire's eyes held with hungry curiosity upon the dwellers in this other world; he stared at the gaping throng from which came a bedlam of shrill cries. Lean colorless hands gesticulated wildly and pointed with long fingers at the two men.

THE din ceased abruptly at a sharp, whistled order from their captor. He stood aside with a guard that had followed from the ship, and he motioned the two before him down the gangway. It was the same scarlet one who had faced them before, the one whom McGuire had attacked in a frenzy of furious fighting, only to go down to blackness and defeat before the slim cylinder of steel and its hissing gas. And the slanting eyes stared wickedly in cold triumph as he or-

dered them to go before him in his march of victory.

McGuire passed down toward the masses of color that were the ones who waited. There were many in the dull red of the ship's crew; others in sky-blue, in gold and pink and combinations of brilliance that blended their loose garments to kaleidoscopic hues. But the figures were similar in one unvarying respect: they were repulsive and ghastly, and their faces showed bright blotches of blood vessels and blue markings of veins through their parchment-gray skins.

The crowd parted to a narrow, living lane, and lean fingers clutched writhingly to touch them as they passed between the solid ranks.

McGuire had only a vague impression of a great building beyond, of lower stories decorated in barbaric colors, of towers above in strange forms of the crystal, colorful beauty they had seen. He walked toward it unseeing; his thoughts were only of the creatures round about.

"What damned beasts!" he said. Then, like his companion, he set his teeth to restrain all show of feeling as they made their way through the lane of incredible living things.

THEY followed their captor through a doorway into an empty room—empty save for one blue-clad individual who stood beside an instrument board let into the wall. Beyond was a long wall, where circular openings yawned huge and black.

The one at the instrument panel received a curt order; the weird voice of the man in red repeated a word that stood out above his curious, wordless tone. "Torg," he said, and again McGuire heard him repeat the syllable.

The operator touched here and there among his instruments, and tiny lights flashed; he threw a switch, and from one of the black openings like a deep cave came a rushing roar of sound. It dropped to silence as the end of a cylindrical car protruded into the room. A door in the metal car opened, and their guard hustled them roughly inside. The one in red followed while behind him the door clanged shut.

Inside the car was light, a diffused radiance from no apparent source, the whole air was glowing about them. And beneath their feet the car moved slowly but with a constant acceleration that built up to tremendous speed. Then that slackened, and Sykes and McGuire clung to each other for support while the car that had been shot like a projectile came to rest.

"Whew!" breathed the lieutenant; "that was quick delivery." Sykes made no reply, and McGuire, too, fell silent to study the tremendous room into which they were led. Here, seemingly, was the stage for their next experience.

A vast open hall with a floor of glass that was like obsidian, empty but for carved benches about the walls; there was room here for a mighty concourse of people. The walls, like those they had seen, were decorated crudely in glaring colors, and embellished with grotesque designs that proclaimed loudly the inexpert touch of the draughtsman. Yet, above them, the ceiling sprang lightly into vaulted, sweeping curves. McGuire's training had held little of architecture, yet even he felt the beauty of line and airy gracefulness of treatment in the structure itself.

THE contrast between the flaunting colors and the finished artistry that lay beneath must have struck a discordant note to the scientist. He leaned closer to whisper.

"It is all wrong some way—the whole world! Beauty and refinement—then crude vulgarity, as incongruous as the people themselves—they do not belong here."

"Neither do we," was McGuire's reply; "it looks like a tough spot that we're in."

He was watching toward a high, arched entrance across the room. A platform before it was raised some six

feet above the floor, and on this were seats—ornate chairs, done in sweeping scrolls of scarlet and gold. A massive seat in the center was like the fantastic throne of a child's fairy tale. From the corridor beyond that entrance came a stir and rustling that rivetted the man's attention.

A trumpet peal, vibrant and peculiar, blared forth from the ceiling overhead, and the red figures of the guards stood at rigid attention with lean arms held stiffly before them. The one in scarlet took the same attitude, then dropped his hands to motion the two men to give the same salute.

"You go to hell," said Lieutenant McGuire in his gentlest tones. And the scarlet figure's thin lips were snarling as he turned to whip his arms up to their position. The first of a procession of figures was entering through the arch.

Sykes, the scientist, was paying little attention. "It isn't true," he was muttering aloud; "it can't be true. Venus! Twenty-six million miles at inferior conjunction!"

He seemed lost in silent communion with his own thoughts; then: "But I said there was every probability of life; I pointed out the similarities—"

"Hush!" warned McGuire. The eyes of the scarlet man were sending wicked looks in their direction. Tall forms were advancing through the arch. They, too, were robed in scarlet, and behind them others followed.

THE trumpet peal from the dome above held now on a long-drawn, single note, while the scarlet men strode in silence across the dais and parted to form two lines. An inverted "V" that faced the entrance—they were an assembly of rigid, blazing statutes whose arms were extended like those on the floor below.

The vibrant tone from on high changed to a crashing blare that shrieked discordantly to send quivering protest through every nerve of the waiting men. Those about them were shouting, and again the name of Torg was heard, as, in the high arch, another character appeared to play his part in a strange drama.

Thin like his companions, yet even taller than them, he wore the same brilliant robes and, an additional mark of distinction, a head-dress of polished gold. He acknowledged the salute with a quick raising of his own arms, then came swiftly forward and took his place upon the massive throne.

Not till he was seated did the others on the platform relax their rigid pose and seat themselves in the semicircle of chairs. And not till then did they so much as glance at the men waiting there before them—the two Earth-men, standing in silent, impassive contemplation of the brilliant scene and with their arms held quiet at their sides. Then every eye turned full upon the captives, and if McGuire had seen deadly malevolence in the face of their captor he found it a hundred-fold in the inhuman faces that looked down upon them now.

The inquiring mind of Professor Sykes did not fail to note the character of their reception. "But why," he asked in whispers of his fellow-prisoner, "—why this open hatred of us? What possible animus can they have against the earth or its people?"

The figure on the throne voiced a curt order; the one who had brought them stepped forward. His voice was raised in the same discordant, singing tone that leaped and wandered from note to note. It conveyed ideas—that was apparent; it was a language that he spoke. And the central figure above nodded a brief assent as he finished.

Their captor took an arm of each in his long fingers and pushed them roughly forward to stand alone before the battery of hard eyes.

NOW the crowned figure addressed them directly. His voice quavered sharply in what seemed an interrogation. The men looked blankly at each other.

Again the voice questioned them impatiently. Sykes and McGuire were silent. Then the young flyer took an involuntary step forward and looked squarely at the owner of the harsh voice.

"We don't know what you are saying," he began, "and I suppose that our lingo makes no sense to you—" He paused in helpless wonderment as to what he could say. Then—

"But what the devil is it all about?" he demanded explosively. "Why all the dirty looks? You've got us here as prisoners—now what do you expect us to do? Whatever it is, you'll have to quit singing it and talk something we can understand."

He knew his words were useless, but this reception was getting on his nerves—and his arm still tingled where the scarlet one had gripped him.

It seemed, though, that his meaning was not entirely lost. His words meant nothing to them, but his tone must have carried its own message. There were sharp exclamations from the seated circle. The one who had brought them sprang forward with outstretched, clutching hands; his face was a blood-red blotch. McGuire was waiting in crouching tenseness that made the red one pause.

"You touch me again," said the waiting man, "and I'll knock you into an outside loop."

The attacker's indecision was ended by a loud order from above. McGuire turned as if he had been spoken to by the leader on the throne. The thin figure was leaning far forward; his eyes were boring into those of the lieutenant, and he held the motionless pose for many minutes. To the angry man, staring back and upward, there came a peculiar optical illusion.

The evil face was vanishing in a shifting cloud that dissolved and reformed, as he watched, into pictures. He knew it was not there, the thing he saw; he knew he was regarding something as intangible as thought; but he got the significance of every detail.

He saw himself and Professor Sykes; they were being crushed like ants beneath a tremendous heel; he knew that the foot that could grind out their lives was that of the one on the throne.

THE cloud-stuff melted to new forms that grew clearer to show him the earth. A distorted Earth—and he knew the distortion came from the mind of the being before him who had never seen the earth at first hand; yet he knew it for his own world. It was turning in space; he saw oceans and continents; and before his mental gaze he saw the land swarming with these creatures of Venus. The one before him was in command; he was seated on an enormous throne; there were Earth people like Sykes and himself who crept humbly before him, while fleets of great Venusian ships hovered overhead.

The message was plain—plain as if written in words of fire in the brain of the man. McGuire knew that these creatures intended that the vision should be true—they meant to conquer the earth. The slim, khaki-clad figure of Lieutenant McGuire quivered with the strength of his refusal to accept the truth of what he saw. He shook his head to clear it of these thought wraiths.

"Not—in—a—million—years!" he said, and he put behind his words all the mental force at his command. "Try that, old top, and they'll give you the fight of your life—" He checked his words as he saw plainly that the thin cruel face that stared and stared was getting nothing from his reply.

"Now what do you think about that?" he demanded of Professor Sykes. "He got an idea across to me—some form of telepathy. I saw his mind, or I saw what he wanted me to see of it. It's taps, he says, for us, and then they think they're going across and annex the world."

He glanced upward again and laughed loudly for the benefit of those

who were watching him so closely. "Fine chance!" he said; "a fat chance!" But in the deeper recesses of his mind he was shaken.

For themselves there was no hope. Well, that was all in a lifetime. But the other—the conquest of the earth—he had to try with all his power of will to keep from his mind the pictures of destruction these beastly things could bring about.

THE chief of this strange council made a gesture of contempt with the grotesque hands that were so translucent yet ashy-pale against his scarlet robe, and the down-drawn thin lips reflected the thoughts that prompted it. The open opposition of Lieutenant McGuire failed to impress him, it seemed. At a word the one who had brought them sprang forward.

He addressed himself to the circle of men, and he harangued them mightily in harsh discordance. He pointed one lean hand at the two captives, then beat it upon his own chest. "They are mine," he was saying, as the men knew plainly. And they realized as if the weird talk came like words to their ears that this monster was demanding that the captives be given him.

An exchange of dismayed glances, and "Not so good!" said McGuire under his breath; "Simon Legree is asking for his slaves. Mean, ugly devil, that boy!"

The lean figures on the platform were bending forward, an expression of mirth—distorted, animal smiles—upon their flabby lips. They represented to the humans, so helpless before them, a race of thinking things in whom no last vestige of kindness or decency remained. But was there an exception? One of the circle was standing; the one beside them was sullenly silent as the other on the platform addressed their ruler.

He spoke at some length, not with the fire and vehemence of the one who had claimed them, but more quietly and dispassionately, and his cold eyes, when they rested on those of McGuire and Sykes, seemed more crafty than actively ablaze with malevolent ill-will. Plainly it was the councilor now, addressing his superior. His inhuman voice was silenced by a reply from the one on the throne.

He motioned — this gold-crowned figure of personified evil—toward the two men, and his hand swept on toward the one who had spoken. He intoned a command in harsh gutturals that ended in a sibilant shriek. And the two standing silent and hopeless exchanged looks of despair.

They were being delivered to this other—that much was plain—but that it boded anything but captivity and torment they could not believe. That last phrase was too eloquent of hissing hate.

THE creature rose, tall and ungainly, from his throne; amid the salutations of his followers he turned and vanished through the arch. The others of his council followed, all but the one. He motioned to the two men to come with him, and the sullen one who had demanded the men for himself obeyed an order from this councilor who was his superior.

He snapped an order, and four of his men ranged themselves about the captives as a guard. Thin metal cords were whipped about the wrists of each; their hands were tied. The wire cut like a knife-edge if they strained against it.

The new director of their destinies was vanishing through an exit at one side of the great hall; their guard hustled them after. A corridor opened before them to end in a gold-lit portal; it was daylight out beyond where a street was filled with hurrying figures in many colors. With quavering shrieks they scattered like frightened fowls as an airship descended between the tall buildings that reflected its passing in opalescent hues.

It was a small craft compared with the one that had brought them, and it

swept down to settle lightly upon the street with no least regard for those who might be crushed by its descent. Consideration for their fellows did not appear as a marked characteristic of this strange people, McGuire observed thoughtfully. They swarmed in endless droves, these multicolored beings who made of the thoroughfare an ever-changing kaleidoscope—and what was a life or two, more or less, among so many? He found no comfort for themselves in the thought.

Shoulder to shoulder, the two followed where the scarlet figure of the councilor moved toward the waiting ship. Only the professor paid further heed to their surroundings; he marveled aloud at the numbers of the people.

"Hundreds of them," he said; "thousands! They are swarming everywhere like rats. Horrible!" His eyes passed on to the buildings in their glory of delicate hues, as he added, "And the contrast they make with their surroundings! It is all wrong some way; I wish I knew—"

They were in the ship when McGuire replied. "I hope we live long enough to satisfy your curiosity," he said grimly.

The ship was rising beneath them; the opal and quartez of the city's walls were flashing swiftly down.

CHAPTER IX

THEY were in a cabin at the very nose of the ship, seated on metal chairs, their hands unshackled and free. Their scarlet guardian reclined at ease somewhat to one side, but despite his apparent disregard his cold eyes seldom left the faces of the two men.

Windows closed them in; windows on each side, in front, above them, and even in the floor beneath. It was a room for observation whose metal-latticed walls served only as a framework for the glass. And there was much to be observed.

The golden radiance of sun-lit clouds was warm above. They rose toward it, until, high over the buildings' tallest spires, there spread on every hand the bewildering beauty of that forest of minarets and sloping roofs and towers, whose many facets made glorious blendings of soft color. Aircraft at many levels swept in uniform directions throughout the sky. The ship they were in hung quiet for a time, then rose to a higher level to join the current of transportation that flowed into the south.

"We will call it south," said Professor Sykes. "The sun-glow, you will observe, is not directly overhead; the sun is sinking; it is past their noon. What is the length of their day? Ah, this interesting — interesting!" The certain fate they had foreseen was forgotten; it is not often given to an astronomer to check at first hand his own indefinite observations.

"Look!" McGuire exclaimed. "Open country! The city is ending!"

AHEAD and below them the buildings were smaller and scattered. Their new master was watching with closest scrutiny the excitement of the men; he whispered an order into a nearby tube, and the ship slowly slanted toward the ground. He was studying these new specimens, as McGuire observed, but the lieutenant paid little attention; his eyes were too thoroughly occupied in resolving into recognizable units the picture that flowed past them so quickly. He was accustomed, this pilot of the army air service, to reading clearly the map that spreads beneath a plane, but now he was looking at an unfamiliar chart.

"Fields," he said, and pointed to squared areas of pale reds and blues; "though what it is, heaven knows. And the trees!—if that's what they are." The ship went downward where an area of tropical denseness made a tangled mass of color and shadow.

"Trees!" Lieutenant McGuire had exclaimed, but these forests were of

tree-forms in weirdest shapes and hues. They grew to towering heights, and their branches and leaves that swayed and dipped in the slow-moving air were of delicate pastel shades.

"No sunlight," said the Professor excitedly; "they have no direct rays of the sun. The clouds act as a screen and filter out actinic rays."

McGuire did not reply. He was watching the countless dots of color that were people—people who swarmed here as they had in the city; people working at these great groves, crouching lower in the fields as the ship swept close; people everywhere in teeming thousands. And like the vegetation about them, they, too, were tall and thin, attenuated of form and with skin like blood-stained ash.

"They need the sun," Sykes was repeating; "both vegetable and animal life. The plants are deficient in chlorophyl—see the pale green of the leaves!—and the people need vitamines. Yet they evidently have electric power in abundance. I could tell them of lamps—"

HIS comments ceased as McGuire lurched heavily against him. The flyer had taken note of the tense, attentive attitude of the one in scarlet; the man was leaning forward, his eyes focused directly upon the scientist's face; he seemed absorbing both words and emotions.

How much could he comprehend? What power had he to vision the idea-pictures in the other's mind? McGuire could not know. But "Sorry!" he told Sykes; "that was clumsy of me." And he added in a whisper, "Keep your thoughts to yourself; I think this bird is getting them."

Buildings flashed under them, not massed solidly as in the city, yet spaced close to one another as if every foot of ground not devoted to their incredible agriculture were needed to house the inhabitants. The ground about them was alive with an equally incredible humanity that swarmed over all this world in appalling profusion.

Their horrid flesh! Their hideous features! And their number! McGuire had a sudden, sickening thought. They were larvae, these crawling hordes—vile worm-things that infested a beautiful world—that bred here in millions, their numbers limited only by the space for their bodies and the food for their stomachs. And he, McGuire, a *man*—he and this other man with his clear-thinking scientific brain were prisoners to this horde; captives, to be used or butchered by those vile, crawling things!

And again it was this world of contrast that drove home the conviction with its sickening certainty. A world of beauty, of delicate colors, of sweeping oceans and gleaming shores and towering cities with their grace and beauty and elfin splendor yet a world that shuddered beneath this devouring plague of grub-like men.

THEY swept past cities and towns and over many miles of open land before their craft swung eastward toward the dark horizon. The master gave another order into the speaking tube and their ship shot forward, faster and yet faster, with a speed that pressed them heavily into their seats. Behind them was the glory of the sunlit clouds; ahead the gloomy gray-black masses that must make a stygian night sky over this lonely world—a world cut off by that vaporous shell from all communion with the stars.

They were over the water; before them a dark ocean reached out in forbidding emptiness to a darker horizon. Ahead, the only broken line in the vast level expanse was a mountain rising abruptly from the sea. It was a volcanic cone surmounting an island; the sunlight's glow reflected from behind them against the sombre mass that lifted toward the clouds. Their ship was high enough to clear it, but instead it swung, as McGuire watched, toward the south.

The island drifted past, and again

they were on their course. But to the flyer there were significant facts that could not pass unobserved. Their own ship had swung in a great circle to avoid this mountain. And all through the skies were others that did the same. The air above and about the grim sentinal peak was devoid of flying shapes.

McGuire caught the eyes of the councilor, their keeper. "What is that?" he asked, though he knew the words were lost on the other. He nodded his head toward the distant peak, and his question was plainly in regard to the island. And for the first time since their coming to this wild world, he saw, flashing across the features of one of these men, a trace of emotion that could only be construed as fear.

The slitted cat eyes lost their look of complacent superiority. They widened involuntarily, and the face was drained of its blotched color. There was fear, terror unmistakable, though it showed for but an instant. He had control of his features almost at once, but the flyer had read their story.

Here was something that gave pause to this race of conquering vermin; a place in the expanse of this vast sea that brought panic to their hearts. And there came to him, as he stowed the remembrance away in his mind, the first glow of hope. These things could fear a mountain; it might be that they could be brought to fear a man.

THE sky was clearing rapidly of traffic and the mountain of his speculations was lost astern, when another island came slanting swiftly up to meet them as their ship swept down from the heights. It was a tiny speck in the ocean's expanse, a speck that resolved itself into the squared fields of colored growth, orchards whose brilliant, strange fruits glowed crimson in the last light of day, and enormous trees, beyond which appeared a house.

A palace, McGuire concluded, when he saw clearly the many-storied pile. Like the buildings they had seen, this also constructed of opalescent quartz. There were windows that glowed warmly in the dusk. A sudden wave of loneliness, almost unbearable, swept over the man.

Windows and gleaming lights, the good sounds of Earth; home! . . And his ears, as he stepped out into the cool air, were assailed with the strange cackle and calling of weird folk; the air brought him scents, from the open ground beyond, of fruits and vegetation like none he had ever known; and the earth, the homeland of his vain imaginings, was millions of empty miles away. .

The leader stopped, and McGuire looked dispiritedly at the unfamiliar landscape under dusky lowering skies. Trees towered high in the air—trees grotesque and weird by all Earth standards — whose limbs were pale green shadows in the last light of day. The foliage, too, seemed bleached and drained of color, but among the leaves were flashes of brilliance where night-blooming flowers burst open like star-shells to fill the air with heavy scents.

Between the men and the forest growth was a row of denser vegetation, great ferns twenty feet and more in height, and among them at regular intervals stood plants of another growth —each a tremendous pod held in air on a thick stalk. Tendrils coiled themselves like giant springs beside each pod, tendrils as thick as a man's wrist. The great pods were ranged in a line that extended as far as McGuire could see in the dim light.

HIS shoulders drooped as the guard herded him and his companion toward the building beyond. He must not be cast down—he would not! Who knew how much of such feeling was read by these keen-eyed observers? And the only thought with which he could fill his mind, the one forlorn ghost of a hope that he could cling to, was that of an island, a volcanic peak that rose from dark waters to point upward toward the heights.

The guard of four was clustered about; the figures were waiting now in the gathering dark—waiting, while the one in scarlet listened and spoke alternately into a jeweled instrument that hung by a slender chain about his neck. He raised one lean hand to motion the stirring guards to silence, listened again intently into the instrument, then pointed that hand toward the cloud-filled sky while he craned his thin neck to look above him.

The men's eyes followed the pointing hand to see only the sullen black of unlit clouds. The last distant aircraft had vanished from the skies; not a ship was in the air—only the enveloping blanket of high-flung vapor that blocked out all traces of the heavens. And then!—

The cloud banks high in the skies flashed suddenly to dazzling, rolling flame. The ground under their feet was shaken as by a distant earthquake, while, above, the terrible fire spread, a swift, flashing conflagration that ate up the masses of clouds.

"What in thunder—" McGuire began; then stopped as he caught, in the light from above, the reflection of fierce exultation in the eyes of the scarlet one. The evil, gloating message of those eyes needed no words to explain its meaning. That this cataclysm was self-made by these beings, McGuire knew, and he knew that in some way it meant menace to him and his.

Yet he groped in thought for some definite meaning. No menace could this be to himself personally, for he and Sykes stood there safe in the company of the councilor himself. Then the threat of this flaming blast must be directed toward the earth!

THE fire vanished, and once more, as Professor Sykes had seen on that night so long ago, the blanket of clouds was broken. McGuire followed the gaze of the scientist whose keen eyes were probing in these brief moments into the depths of star-lit space.

"There—there!" Sykes exclaimed in awe-struck tones. His hand was pointing outward through the space where flames had cleared the sky. A star was shining in the heavens with a glory that surpassed all others. It outshone all neighboring stars, and it sent its light down through the vast empty reaches of space, a silent message to two humans, despondent and heart-sick, who stared with aching eyes.

Lieutenant McGuire did not hear his friend's whispered words. No need to name that distant world—it was Earth! Earth! . . . And it was calling to its own. . .

There was a flying-field—so plain before his mental eyes; men in khaki and leather who moved and talked and spoke of familiar things . and the thunder of motors and roaring planes. . . .

Some far recess within his deeper self responded strangely. What now of threats and these brute-things that threatened?—he was one with this picture he had visioned. He was himself; he was a man of that distant world of men; they would show these vile things how men could meet menace—or death. His shoulders were back and unconsciously he stood erect.

The scarlet figure was close beside them in the dusk, his voice vibrant with a quality which should have struck fear to his captives' hearts as he ordered them on. But the look in his crafty eyes changed to one of puzzled wonder at sight of the men.

Hands on each other's shoulders, they stood there in the gathering dark, where grotesque trees arched twistingly overhead. Their moment of depression had passed; Earth had called, and they had heard it, each after his own fashion. But to each the call had been one of clear courage. No longer cast off and forlorn, they were one with their own world.

"Down," said Professor Sykes with a whimsical smile; "down, but not out!" And the lieutenant responded in kind.

"Are we down-hearted?" he demanded loudly. And the two turned as one man to grin at the scarlet one as they thundered, "N-o-o!"

CHAPTER X

TWO men grinned in derision at the horrible, man-shaped thing that held their destinies in his lean, inhuman hands!—but they turned abruptly away to look again above them where that bright star still shone through an opening in the clouds.

"The earth! Home!" It seemed as if they could never tear their eyes away from the sight.

Their captor whistled an order, and the guard of four tugged vainly at the two, who resisted that they might gaze upon their own world until the closing clouds should blot it from sight. A cry from one of the red guards roused them.

The dark was closing in fast, and their surroundings were dim. Vaguely, McGuire felt more than saw one of the red figures whirled into the air. He sensed a movement in the jungle darkness where were groves of weird trees and the tangle of huge vegetable growths. What it was he could not say, but he felt the guard who clutched at him quiver in terror.

Their leader snatched at the instrument that hung about his neck and put it to his lips; he whistled an order, sharp and shrill. Blazing light that seemed to flame in the air was the response; the air was aglow with an all-pervading brilliance like that in the car that had whirled them from the landing field. The light was everywhere, and the building before them was surrounded by a dazzling envelope of luminosity.

Whatever of motion or menace there had been ceased abruptly. Their guard, three now in number instead of four, seized them roughly and hustled them toward an open door. No time, as they passed, for more than fleeting impressions: a hall of warm, glowing light—a passage that branched off—and, at the end, a room into which they were thrown, while a metal door clanged behind them.

THESE were no gentle hands that hurled the men staggering through the doorway, and Professor Sykes fell headlong upon the glassy floor. He sprang to his feet, his face aflame with anger. "The miserable beasts!" he shouted.

"Take it easy," admonished the flyer. "We're in the hoose-gow; no use of getting all fussed up if they don't behave like perfect gentlemen.

"There's a bunk in the corner," he said, and pointed to a woven hammock that was covered with soft cloths; "and here's another that I can sling. Twin beds! What more do you want?"

He opened a door and the splash of falling water came to them. A fountain cascaded to the ceiling to fall splashing upon a floor of inlaid, glassy tile. McGuire whistled.

"Room and bath," he said. "And you complained of the service!"

"I have an idea," he told the scientist, "that our scarlet friend who owns this place intends to treat us decently, even though his helpers are a bit rough. My hunch is that he wants to get some information out of us. That old bird back there in the council chamber told me as plain as day that they think they are going to conquer the earth. Maybe that's why we are here—as exhibits A and B, for them to study and learn how to lick us."

"You are talking what I would have termed nonsense a month ago," replied Sykes, "but now—well, I am afraid you are right. And," he said slowly, "I fear that they are equally correct. They have conquered space; they have ships propelled by some unknown power; they have gas weapons, as you and I have reason to know. And they have all the beastly ferocity to carry such a plan through to success. But I wonder what that sky-splitting blast meant."

"Bombardment," the flyer told him; "bombardment of the earth as sure as you're alive."

"More nonsense," said Sykes; "and probably correct. . . . Well, what are we to do?—sit tight and give them as little information as we can? or—" His question ended unfinished; the alternative, it seemed, was not plain to him.

"There's only one answer," said McGuire. "We must get away; escape somehow."

PROFESSOR SYKES' eyes showed his appreciation of a spirit that could still dare to hope, but he asked dejectedly: "Escape? Good idea. But where to?"

"I have an idea," the flyer said slowly. "An idea about an island." He told the professor what he had observed—the fact that there was one spot of land on this globe from which the traffic of these monsters of Venus steered clear. This, he explained, must have some significance.

"Whatever is there, God only knows," he admitted, "but it is something these devils don't like a little bit. It might be interesting to learn more. We'll make a break for it; find a boat. No, we probably can't do it, but we can make a try. Now what is our first step, I wonder."

"Our first step," said Professor Sykes, measuring his words as if he might be working out some astronomical calculation, "is into the inverted shower-bath, if you feel as hot as I do. And our next step, when all is quiet for the night, is through the window I see beyond. I can see the branches of one of those undernourished trees from here."

"Last one in is a lop-eared Venusian!" said McGuire, throwing off his jacket. And in that strange room in a strange world, under the shadow of death and of tortures unknown, the two men stripped with all the care-free abandon of a couple of schoolboys racing to be first in the old swimming hole.

IT was some time later when the door opened and a long red hand pushed a tray of food into the room. The tray was of unbreakable crystal—he rattled it heedlessly upon the floor—and it held crystal dishes of unknown foods.

They were sampling them all when Sykes remarked plaintively, "I would like to know what under heaven I am eating."

"I've wished to know that in lots of restaurants," McGuire replied. "I remember a place down on—" He stopped abruptly, then chewed in silence upon a fruit like a striped pepper that stung his mouth and tongue while he scarcely felt it. References to Earth things plainly were to be avoided: the visions they brought before one's eyes were unnerving.

They made a pretence of sleeping in case they were being observed, and it was some hours later when the two stood quietly beside the open window. As Sykes had seen, there were branches of a pale, twisted tree-growth close outside. McGuire tried his weight upon them, then swung himself out, hand over hand, upon the branch that bent low beneath him. Sykes was close behind when he clambered to the ground to stand for some minutes, listening silently in the dark.

"Too easy!" the lieutenant whispered. "They are too foxy to leave a gateway like that—but here we are. The shore is off in this direction."

The dark of a night unrelieved by a single star was about them as they moved noiselessly away. They followed open ground at first. The building that had been their brief prison was upon their right; beyond and at the left was where the ship landed—it was gone now—and beyond that the wall of vegetation.

And again, in the dark, McGuire had an uncanny sense of motion. Soft bodies were slipping quietly one upon another; something that lived was there beyond them in the night. No sound or sign of life came from the

house; no guard had been posted; and McGuire stopped again, before plunging into the tangled growth, to whisper, "Too easy, Sykes! There's something about this—"

HE had pushed aside the fronds of a giant fern; a cautious step beyond his hands touched a slippery, pliant vine. And his whisper ended as he felt the thing turn and twist beneath his hand. It was alive!—writhing!—cold as the body of a monster snake, and just as vicious and savage in the way that it whipped down and about him in the gloom of the starless night.

The thing was alive! It threw its coils around his body in an embrace that left him breathless; a slender tendril was tightening about his neck; his hands and arms were bound.

His ankle was grasped as he was whirled aloft—a human hand that gripped him this time—and Sykes, forgetting discretion and the need for silence, was shouting in the darkness that gave no clue to their opponent. "Hang on!" he yelled. "I've got you, Mac!"

His shouts were cut short by another serpent shape that thrashed him and smashed the softer growing things to earth that it might wrap this man, too, in its deadly coils.

McGuire felt his companion's hold loosen as he was lifted from the ground; there were other arms flailing about him—living, coiling things that seemed to fight one with another for this prize. Abruptly, blindingly, the scene was vividly etched before him: the strange trees, the ferns, the writhing and darting serpent-arms! They were illumined in a dazzling, white light!

He was in the air, clutched strangely in constricting arms; an odor of rotted flesh was in his nostrils, sickening, suffocating! Beyond and almost beneath him a cauldron of green gaped open, and he saw within it a pool of thick liquid that eddied and steamed to give off the stench of putresence.

All this in an instant of vision—and in that instant he knew the death they courted. It was a giant pod that held that pool—one of the growths he had seen ranged out like a line of sentinels. But the terrible tendrils that had been coiled and at rest were wrapped about him now, drawing him to that reeking pool of death and the waiting thick lips that would close above him. Sykes, too! The tendrils that had clutched him were whisking his helpless body where another gaping mouth was open—

AND then, in the blazing light that was more brilliant than any light of day in this world, the hold about McGuire relaxed. He saw, as he fell, the thick, green lips snap shut; and the arms that had held him pulled back into harmless, tight-wound coils.

Their bodies crashed to earth where a great fern bent beneath them to to cushion their fall. And the men lay silent and gasping for great choking breaths, while from the building beyond came the cackle and shrieking of man-things in manifest enjoyment of the frustrated plans.

It was the laughter that determined McGuire.

"Damn the plants!" he said between hoarse breaths. "Man-eating plants—but they're — better — than — those devils! And there's only—one line of them:- I saw them here before. Shall we go on?—make a break for it?"

Sykes rolled to the shelter of an arching frond and, without a word, went crawling away. McGuire was behind him, and the two, as they came to open ground, sprang to their feet and ran on through the weird orchard where tree trunks made dim, twisting lines. They ran blindly and helplessly toward the outer dark that promised temporary shelter.

A hopeless attempt: both men knew the futility of it, while they stumbled onward through the dark. Behind them the night was hideous with noise

as the great palace gave forth an eruption of shrieking, inhuman forms that scattered with whistling and wailing calls in all directions.

A MILE or more of groping, hopeless flight, till a yellow gleam shone among the trees to guide them. A building, beyond a clearing, gave a bright illumination to the black night.

"We've run in a circle," choked McGuire, his voice weak and uncertain with exhaustion. "Like a couple of fools!—"

He waited until the heavy breathing that shook his body might be controlled, then corrected himself, "No—this is another—a new one—see the towers! And listen—it's a radio station!"

The slender frameworks that towered high in air glowed like flame—a warning to the ships whose lights showed now and then far overhead. And, clear and distinct, there came to the listening men the steady, crackling hiss of an uninterrupted signal.

Against the lighted building moving figures showed momentarily, and McGuire pulled his friend into the safe concealment of a tangle of growth, while the group of yelling things sped past.

"Come on," he told Sykes; "we can't get away—not a chance! Let's have a look at this place, and perhaps—well, I have an idea!" He slipped silently, cautiously on, where a forest of jungle ferns gave promise of safe passage.

SOME warning had been sounded; the occupants of the building were scattered to aid in the man-hunt. Only one was left in the room where two Earth-men peeped in at the door.

The figure was seated upon an insulated platform, and his long hands manipulated keys and levers on a table before him. McGuire and Sykes stared amazedly at this broadcasting station whose air was filled with a pandemonium of crashing sound from some distant room, but McGuire was concerned mainly with the motion of a lean, blood-red hand that swung an object like a pointer in free-running sweeps above a dial on the table. And he detected a variation in the din from beyond as the pointer moved swiftly.

Here was the control board for those messages he had heard; this was the instrument that varied the sending mechanism to produce the wailing wireless cries that made words in some far-distant ears. McGuire, as he slipped into the room and crept within leaping distance of the grotesque thing so like yet unlike a man, was as silent as the nameless, writhing horror that had seized them in the dark. He sprang, and the two came crashing to the floor.

Lean arms came quickly about him to clutch and tear at his face, but the flyer had an arm free, and one blow ended the battle. The man of Venus relaxed to a huddle of purple and yellow cloth from which a ghastly face protruded. McGuire leaped to his feet and sprang to the place where the other had been.

"Hold them off as long as you can!" he shouted to Sykes, and his hand closed upon the pointer.

Did this station send where he was hoping? Was this the station that had communicated with the ship that had hovered above their flying field in that far-off land? He did not know, but it was a powerful station, and there was a chance—

HE moved the pointer frantically here and there, swung it to one side and another; then found at last a point on the outside of the strange design beneath his hand where the pointer could rest while the crashing crackle of sound was stilled.

And now he swung the pointer—upon the plate—anywhere!—and the noise from beyond told instantly of the current's passage. He held it an instant, then pushed it back to the silent spot—a dash! A quick return that flashed back again to bring silence

—a dot! More dashes and dots . . . and McGuire thanked a kindly heaven that had permitted him to learn the language of the air, while he cursed his slowness in sending.

Would it reach? Would there be anyone to hear? No certainty; he could only flash the wild Morse symbols out into the night. He must try to get word to them—warn them! And "Blake," he called, and spelled out the name of their field, "warning—Venus—"

"Hold them!" he yelled to Sykes at the sound of rushing feet. "Keep them off as long as you can!"

". . . Prepare—for invasion. Blake, this is McGuire. . . ." Over and over he worked the swinging pointer into symbols that might in some way, by some fortunate chance, help that helpless people to resist the horror that lay ahead.

And while heavy bodies crashed against the door that Sykes was holding, there came some deep-hidden well of memory an inspiration. There was a man he had once met—a man who had confided wondrous things; and now, with the knowledge of these others who had conquered space, he could believe wholly what he had laughed and joked about before. That man, too, had claimed to have travelled far from the earth; he had invented a machine; his name—

The pointer was swinging in frenzied haste to spell over and over the name of a man, and the name, too, of a forgotten place in the mountains of Nevada. It was repeating the message; then finished in one long crashing wail as a cloud of vapor shot about McGuire and his hand upon the pointer went suddenly limp.

CHAPTER XI

CAPTAIN BLAKE'S game of solitaire had become an obsession. He drove himself to the utmost in the line of duty, and, through the day, the demands of the flying field filled his mind to forgetfulness And for the rest, he forced his mind to concentrate upon the turn of the cards. He could not read—and he must not think!—so he sat through long evenings trying vainly to forget.

He looked up with an expressionless face as Colonel Boynton entered the room. The colonel saw the cards and nodded.

"Does that help?" he asked, and added without waiting for an answer, "I don't like cards, but I find my mathematics works well. My old problems—I can concentrate on them, and stop this eternal, damnable thinking, thinking—"

There was something of the same look forming about the eyes of both—that look that told of men who struggled gamely under the sentence of death, refusing to think or to fear, and waiting, waiting, impotently. Blake looked at the colonel with a carefully emotionless gaze. "It's hell in the big towns, I hear."

The Colonel nodded. "Can't blame them much, if that's what appeals to them. A year and a half!—and they've got to forget it. Why not crowd all the recklessness and excesses they can into the time that is left?—poor devils! But for the most part the world is wagging along, and people are going through the familiar motions."

"Well," said Blake, "I used to wonder at times how a man might feel if he were facing execution. Now we all know. Just going dumbly along, feeling as little as we can, thinking of anything, everything—except the one thing. They've turned to using dope, a lot of them, I hear. Maybe it helps; nobody cares much. Only a year and a half."

HE raised his face from which all expression was consciously erased. "Any possible hope?" he asked. "Or do we take it when it comes and fight with what we've got as long as we can? There was some talk in the papers of an invention—Bureau of

Standards cooperating with the big General Committee to investigate. Anything come of it?"

"A thousand of them," said the colonel, "all futile. No, we can't expect much from those things. Though there's a whisper that came to me from Washington. General Clinton — you may remember him; he was here when the thing first broke—says that some scientist, a real one, not another of these half-baked geniuses, has worked out a transformation of some kind. It was too deep for me, but it is based upon changing hydrogen into helium, I think. Liberates some perfectly tremendous amount of power. The general had it all down pat—"

He stopped speaking at the change in Captain Blake's face. The careful repression of all emotions was gone; the face was suddenly alive—

"I know," he said sharply; "I remember something of the theory. There is a difference in the atoms or their protons—the liberation of an electron from each atom—matter actually transformed into energy: theoretical, what I have read. But—but—Oh my God, Boyton, do you mean that they've got it? —that it will drive us through space?"

THE colonel drove one fist into the palm of his other hand. "Fool! Idiot!" he exclaimed, and it was evident that the epithets were intended for himself.

"I had forgotten that you had been trained along that line. The general wants a man to work with them, somewhat as a liason officer to link the army requirements closely with their developments: we are hoping to work out a space ship, of course. You are just the man; I will radio him this minute. Be ready to leave—" The slamming of the door marked a hurried exit toward the radio room.

And abruptly, stifflingly, Captain Blake dared to hope. "Scientists will come through with something, some new method of propulsion. All the world is looking to them!" His thoughts were leaping from one possibility to another. "Some miracle of power that will drive a fleet through space as they have done, to battle with the enemy on his own ground—"

Could he help? Was there one little thing that he could do to apply their knowledge to practical ends? The thought thrilled him with overpowering emotion an hour later as he felt the lift of the plane beneath him.

"Report to General Clinton," the colonel's reply had said. "Captain Blake will be assigned to special duty." He opened the throttle to his ship's best cruising speed, but his spirit was soaring ahead to urge on the swift scout ship whose wings drove steadily into the gathering dusk.

AND then, after long hours, Washington! Brief words with many men—and discouragement! The seat of government of the United States was a city of despondent men, weary, hopeless, but fighting. There was a look of strain on every face; the eyes told a story of sleepless nights and futile thinking and planning. Blake's elation was short lived.

He was sent to New York and on into the state, where the laboratories of a great electrical company had turned their equipment from commercial purposes to those of war. Here, surely, one might find fuel to feed the dying embers of hope; the new development must give greater promise than General Clinton had intimated.

"Nothing you can do as yet," he was told, when he had stated his mission. "It is still experimental, but we have worked out the transformation on a small scale, and harnessed the power."

Captain Blake was in no mood for temporizing; he was tired with being put off. He stared belligerently at the chief of this department.

"Power—hell!" he said. "We've got power now. How will you apply it? How will we use it for travelling through space?"

The great man of science was unmoved by the outburst. "That is poppycock," he replied; "the unscientific twaddle of the sensational press. We are practical men here; we are working to give you men who do the fighting better ships and better arms. But you will use them right here on Earth."

The calm assurance of this man who spoke with a voice of such confidence and authority left the flyer speechless. His brain sent a chaos of profane and violent expletives to the lips that dared not frame them. There was no adequate reply.

BLAKE jammed his hat upon his head and walked blindly from the room. Heedless of the protests of those he jostled on the street he went raging on, but some subconscious urge directed his steps. He found himself at the railway. There was a station, and a grilled window where he was asking for a ticket back to Washington. And on the following day—

"There is nothing I can do," he told General Clinton. "It is hopeless. I ask to be relieved."

"Why?" The general snapped the question at him. What kind of man was this that Boynton had sent him?

"They are fools," said Blake bluntly, "pompous, well-meaning fools! They are planning better motors, more power"—he laughed harshly—"and they think that with them we can attack ships that are independent of the air."

"Still," asked General Clinton coldly, "for what purpose do you wish to be relieved? What do you intend to do?"

"Return to the field," said Captain Blake, "to work, and put my planes and personnel in the best possible condition; then, when the time comes, go up and fight like hell."

An unusual phrasing of a request when one is addressing one's commander; but the older man threw back his shoulders, that were bending under responsibilities too great for one man to bear, and took a long breath that relaxed his face and seemed to bring relief.

"You've got the right idea,"—he spoke slowly and thoughtfully—"the right philosophy. It is all we have left—to fight like hell when the time comes. Give my regards to Colonel Boynton; he sent me a good man after all."

ANOTHER long flight, westward this time, and, despite the failure of his hopes and of his errand, Blake was flying with a mind at peace. "It is all we have left," the general had said. Well, it was good to face facts, to admit them—and that was that! There was no use of thinking or worrying. . . . He lifted the ship to a higher level and glanced at his compass. There were clouds up ahead, and he drove still higher into the night, until he was above them.

And again his peace of mind was not to last.

It was night when he swung the ship over his home port and signalled for a landing. A flood of light swept out across the field to guide him down. He went directly to the colonel's quarters but found him gone.

"In the radio room, I think," an orderly told him.

Colonel Boynton was listening intently in the silent room; he scowled with annoyance at the disturbance of Blake's coming; then, seeing who it was, he motioned quickly for the captain to listen in.

"Good Lord, Blake," he told the captain in an excited whisper; "I'm glad you're here. Another ship had been sighted; she's been all over the earth; just scouting and mapping, probably. And there have been signals the same as before—the same until just now. Listen!—it's talking Morse!—it's been calling for you!"

He thrust a head set into Blake's hands, then reached for some papers. "Poor reception, but there's what we've got," he said.

THE paper held the merest fragments of messages that the operator had deciphered. Blake examined them curiously while he listened at the silent receiver.

"Maricopa"—the message, whatever it was, was meant for them, but there were only parts of words and disjointed phrases that the man had written down—"Venus attacking Earth . . . Captain Blake . . . Sykes and. . . ."

At the name of Sykes, Blake dropped the paper.

"What does this mean?" he demanded. "Sykes!—why Sykes was the astronomer who was captured with McGuire!"

"Listen! Listen!" The colonel's voice was almost shrill with excitement.

The night was whispering faintly the merest echo of a signal from a station far away, but it resolved itself into broken fragments of sound that were long and short in duration, and the fragments joined to form letters in the Morse code.

"See Winslow," it told them, and repeated the message: "See Winslow at Sierra. . . ." Some distant storm crashed and rattled for breathless minutes. "Blake see Winslow. This is McGuire, Blake. Winslow can help—"

The message ended abruptly. One long, wailing note; then again the night was voiceless . . . and in the radio room at Maricopa Flying Field two men stood speechless, unbreathing, to stare at each other with incredulous eyes, as might men who had seen a phantom—a ghost that spoke to them and called them by name.

"McGuire — is — alive!" stammered Blake. "They've taken him—there!"

COLONEL BOYNTON was considering, weighing all the possibilities, and his voice, when he answered, had the ring of conviction.

"That was no hoax," he agreed; "that quavering tone could never be faked. That message was sent from the same station we heard before. Yes, McGuire is alive—or was up to the end of that sending. . . . But, who the devil is Winslow?"

Blake shook his head despairingly. "I don't know," he said. "And it seems as if I should—"

It was hours later, far into the night, when he sprang from out a half-conscious doze to find himself in the middle of the floor with the voice of McGuire ringing clearly in his ears. A buried memory had returned to the the level of his conscious mind. He rushed over to the colonel's quarters.

"I've got it," he shouted to that officer whose head was projecting from an upper window. "I remember! McGuire told me about this Winslow—some hermit that he ran across. He has some invention—some machine—said he had been to the moon. I always thought Mac half believed him. We'll go over Mac's things and find the address."

"Do you think—do you suppose—?" began Colonel Boynton doubtfully.

"I don't dare to think," Blake responded. "God only knows if we dare hope; but Mac—Mac's got a level head; he wouldn't send us unless he knew! Good Lord, man!" he exclaimed, "Mac radioed us from Venus; is there anything impossible after that?"

"Wait there," said Colonel Boynton; "I'll be right down—"

CHAPTER XII

LIEUTENANT McGUIRE awoke, as he had on other occasions, to the smell of sickly-sweet fumes and the stifling pressure of a mask held over his nose and mouth. He struggled to free himself, and the mask was removed. Another of the man-creatures whom McGuire had not seen before helped him to sit up.

A group of the attenuated figures, with their blood-and-ashes faces, regarded him curiously. The one who had helped him arise forced the others to stand back, and he gave McGuire a drink of yellow fluid from a crystal

goblet. The dazed man gulped it down to feel a following surge of warmth and life that pulsed through his paralyzed body. The figures before him came sharply from the haze that had enveloped them. A window high above admitted a golden light that meant another day, but it brought no cheer or encouragement to the flyer. McGuire felt crushed and hopeless in the knowledge that his life must still go on.

If only that sleep could have continued—carried him out to the deeper sleep of death! What hope for them here? Not a chance! And then he remembered Sykes; he mustn't desert Sykes. He looked about him to see the same prison room from which he and Sykes had escaped. The body of the scientist was motionless on the hammock-bed across the room; an occasional deep-drawn breath showed that the man still lived.

No, he must not leave Sykes, even if he had the means of death. They would fight it through together, and perhaps—perhaps—they might yet be of service, might find some way to avert the catastrophe that threatened their world. Hopeless? Beyond doubt. But he must hope—and fight!

The leader had watched the light of understanding as it returned to the flyer's eyes. He motioned now to the others, and McGuire was picked up bodily by four of them and carried from the room.

McGUIRE'S mind was alert once more; he was eager to learn what he could of this place that was to be their prison, but he saw little. A glory of blending colors beyond, where the golden light from without shone through opal walls—then he found himself upon a narrow table where straps of metal were thrown quickly about to bind him fast. He was tied hand and foot to the table that moved forward on smooth rollers to a waiting lift.

What next? he questioned. Not death, for they had been too careful to keep him alive, these repulsive things that stared at him with such cold malevolence. Then what? And McGuire found himself with unpleasant recollections of others he had seen strapped in similar fashion to an operating table.

The lift that he had thought would rise fell smoothly, instead, to stop at some point far below ground where the table with its helpless burden was rolled into a great room.

He could move his head, and McGuire turned and twisted to look at the maze of instruments that filled the room—a super-laboratory for experiments of which he dared not think.

"Whoever says I'm not scared to death is a liar," he whispered to himself, but he continued to look and wonder as he was wheeled before a gleaming machine of many coils and shining, metal parts. A smooth sheet of metal stood vertically beyond him; painted a grayish-white, he saw; but he could not imagine its use. A throng of people, seated in the room, turned blood-red faces toward the bound man and the metal sheet.

"Looks as if we were about to put on a show of some kind," he told himself, "and I am cast for a leading role." He watched as best he could from his bound position while a tall figure in robes of lustreless black appeared to stand beside him.

The newcomer regarded him with a face that was devoid of all emotion. McGuire felt the lack of the customary expression of hatred; there was not even that; and he knew he was nothing more than a strange animal, bound and helpless, ready for this weird creature's experiments. The one in black held a pencil whose tip was a tiny, brilliant light.

ABRUPTLY the room plunged to darkness, where the only visible thing was this one point of light. Ceaselessly it waved back and forth before his eyes; he followed it in a pattern of strange design; it ap-

proached and receded. Again and again the motion was repeated, until McGuire felt himself sinking—sinking—into a passive state of lethargy. His muscles relaxed; his mind was at rest; there seemed nothing in the entire universe of being but the single point of light that drew him on and on . . . till something whispered from the far reaches of black space. . . .

It came to him, an insistent call. It was asking about the earth—his own world. *What of Earth's armies and their means of defense?* Vaguely he sensed the demand, and without conscious volition he responded. He pictured the world he had known; how plainly he saw the wide field at Maricopa, and the sweeping flight of a squadron of planes! *Yes—yes! How high could they ascend?* From one of the planes he saw the world below; the ships were near their ceiling; this was the limit of their climb. *And did they fight with gas? What of their deadliness?* And again he was seated in a plane, and he was firing tiny bullets from a tiny gun. No. They did not use gas. *But on the ground below—what fortifications? What means of defense?*

McGuire's mind was no longer his own; he could only respond to that invisible questioner, that insistent demand from out of the depths where he was floating. And yet there was something within him that protested, that clamored at his mind and brain.

Fortifications! They must know about fortifications—anti-aircraft guns—means for combatting aerial attack. Yes, he knew, and he must explain—and the thing within him pounded in the back of his brain to draw him back to himself.

He saw a battery of anti-aircraft guns in operation; the guns were firing; shells were bursting in little plumes of smoke high in the air. And that self within him was shouting now, hammering at him: "You are seeing it," it told him; "it is there before you on the screen. Stop! Stop!"

AND for an instant McGuire had the strange experience of witnessing his own thoughts. Memories, mental records of past experience, were flashing through his mind; mock battles, and the batteries were firing! And, before him, on the metal screen, there glowed a vivid picture of the same thing. Men were serving the guns with sure swiftness; the bursts were high in the air in a flash of understanding Lieutenant McGuire knew that he was giving his country's secrets to the enemy. And in that same instant he felt himself swept upward from the depths of that darkness where he had drifted. He was himself again, bound and helpless before an infernal contrivance of these devil-creatures. They had read his thoughts; the machine beside him had projected them upon the screen for all to see; a steady clicking might mean their reproduction in motion pictures for later study! He, Lieutenant McGuire, was a traitor against his will!

The screen was blank, and the lights of the room came on to show the thin lips that smiled complacently in a cruel and evil face.

McGuire glared back into that face, and he tried with all the mental force that he could concentrate to get across to the exultant one the fact that they had not wholly conquered him. This much they had got—but no more!

The thin-lipped one had an instrument in his hand, and McGuire felt the prick of a needle plunged into his arm. He tried to move his head and found himself powerless. And now, in the darkness of the room where all lights were again extinguished, the helpless man was fighting the most horrible of battles, and the battleground was within his own mind. He was two selves, and he fought and struggled with all his consciousness to keep those memories from flooding him.

With one part of himself he knew what it meant: a sure knowledge given these invaders of what they must pre-

pare to meet; he was betraying his country; the whole of humanity! And that raging, raving self was powerless to check the flow of memory pictures that went endlessly through his mind and out upon the screen beyond. . .

He had no sense of time; he was limp and exhausted with his fruitless struggle when he felt himself released from the bondage of the metal straps and placed again in the hammock in his room. And he could only look wanly and hopelessly after the figure of Professor Sykes, carried by barbarous figures to the same ordeal.

SLEEP, through the long night, restored both McGuire and his companion to normal strength. The flyer was seated with his head bowed low in his cupped hands. His words seemed wrung from an agony of spirit. "So that's what they brought us here for," he said harshly; "that's why they're keeping us alive!"

Professor Sykes walked back and forth in their bare room while he shook his impotent fists in the air.

"I told them everything," he exploded; "everything! Their astronomical knowledge must be limited; under this blanket of clouds they can see nothing, and from their ships they could make approximations only.

"And I have told them—the earth, and its days and seasons—its orbital velocity and motion—its relation to the orbit of this accursed planet. They had documents from the observatory and I explained them; I corrected their time of firing their big gun on its equatorial position. Oh, there is little I left untold—damn them!"

"I wish to heaven," said the flyer savagely, "that we had known: we would have jumped out of their beastly ship somehow ten thousand feet up, and we would have taken our information with us."

Sykes nodded agreement. "Well," he asked, "how about to-morrow, and the next day, and the next? They will want more facts; they will pump the last drop of information from us. Are we going to allow it?"

McGUIRE'S tone was dry. "You know the answer to that as well as I do. We have just two alternatives: either we get out of here—find some place to hide in, then find some way to put a crimp in their plans; or we get out of here for good. It's twenty feet, not twenty thousand, from that window to the ground, but I think a head-first dive would do it."

Sykes did not reply at once; he seemed to be weighing some problem in his mind.

"I would prefer the water," he said at last. "If we *can* get away and reach the shore, and if there is not a possibility of escape—which I must admit I consider highly improbable—well, we can always swim out as far as we can go, and the result will be certain.

"This other is so messy." The man had stopped his ceaseless pacing, and he even managed a cheerful smile at the lieutenant. "And, remember, it might only cripple us and leave us helpless in their hands."

"Sounds all right to me," McGuire agreed, and there was a tone of finality in his voice as he added: "They've made us do that traitor act for the last time, anyway."

DAYLIGHT comes slowly through cloud-filled skies; the window of the room where the fountain sprayed ceaselessly was showing the first hint of gold in the eastern sky. Above was the utter darkness of the cloud-wrapped night as the two men swung noiselessly out into the grotesque branches of a tree to make their way into the gloom below. There, under the cover of great leaves, they crouched in silence, while the darkness about them faded and a sound of subdued whistling noises came to them from the night.

A wheel creaked, and in the dim light two figures appeared tugging at a cart upon which was a cage of woven

wire. Beyond them, against the darker background of denser growth, tentacles coiled and twisted above the row of guardian plants that surrounded the house.

One of the ghostly forms reached within the cage and brought forth a struggling object that whimpered in fear. The low whine came distinctly to the hidden men. They saw a vague black thing tossed through the air and toward the deadly plants; they heard the swishing of pliant tentacles and the yelping cry of a frightened animal. And the cry rose to a shriek that ended with the gulping splash of thick liquid.

The giant pod next in line was open—they could see it dimly—and its tentacles were writhing convulsively, hungrily, across the ground. Another animal was taken from the cage and thrown to the waiting, serpent forms that closed about and whirled it high in air. Another—and another! The yelps of terror grew faint in the distance as the monsters passed on in their gruesome work. And the two men, palpitant with memories of their own experience, were limp and sick with horror.

IN the growing light they saw more plainly the fleshy, pliant arms that whipped through the air or felt searchingly along the ground. No hope there for bird or beast that passed by in the night; nor for men, as they knew too well. But now, as the golden light increased, the arms drew back to form again the tight-wound coils that flattened themselves beside the monstrous pods whose lips were closing. Locked within them were the pools of liquid that could dissolve a living body into food for these vampires of the vegetable world.

"Damnable!" breathed Sykes in a savage whisper. "Utterly damnable! And this world is peopled with such monsters!"

The last deadly arm was tightly coiled when the men stole off through the lush growth that reached even above their heads. McGuire remembered the outlines he had seen from the air and led the way where, if no better concealment could be found, the ocean waited with promise of rest and release from their inhuman captors.

They counted on an hour's start—it would be that long before their jailer would come with their morning meal and give the alarm—and now they went swiftly and silently through the stillness of a strange world. The air that flicked misty-wet across their faces was heavy and heady with the perfume of night-blooming plants. Crimson blossoms flung wide their odorous petals, and the first golden light was filtered through tremendous tree-growths of pale lavenders and grays to show as unreal colors in the vegetation close about them.

THEY found no guards; the isolation of this island made the land itself their prison, and the men ran at full speed through every open space, knowing as they ran that there was no refuge for them—only the ocean waiting at the last. But their flight was not unobserved.

A great bird rose screaming from a tangle of vines; its heavy, flapping wings flashed red against the pale trees. A pandemonium of shrieking cries echoed its alarm as other birds took flight; the forest about them was in an uproar of harsh cries. And faintly, from far in the rear, came a babel of shrill calls—weird, inhuman!—the voices of the men-things of Venus.

"It's all off," said McGuire sharply; "they'll be on our trail now!" He plunged through where the trees were more open, and Sykes was beside him as they ran with a burst of speed toward a hilltop beyond.

They paused, panting, upon the crest. A wide expanse of foliage in delicate shadings swept out before them to wave gently in a sea of color under the morning breeze, and beyond was another sea that beckoned with white breakers on a rocky shore.

"The ocean!" gasped Sykes, and pointed a trembling hand toward their goal. "But—I had no idea—that suicide—was—such hard work!"

The tall figure of Lieutenant McGuire turned to the shorter, breathless man, and he gripped hard at one of his hands.

"Sykes," he said, "I'll never get another chance to say it—but you're one good scout! . . . Come on!"

McGUIRE fought to force his way through jungle growth, while screaming birds marked where they went. The sounds of their pursuers were close behind them when the two tore their way through the last snarled tangle of pale vine to stand on a sheer bluff, where, below, deep waters crashed against a rocky wall. They staggered with weariness and gulped sobbingly of the morning air. McGuire could have sworn he was exhausted beyond any further effort, yet from somewhere he summoned energy to spring savagely upon a tall, blood-red figure whose purpling face rose suddenly to confront them.

One hand closed upon the metal tube that the other hand raised, and, with his final reserve of strength, the flyer wrapped an arm about the tall body and rushed it stumblingly toward the cliff. To be balked now!—to be brought back to that intolerable prison and the unthinkable role of traitor! The khaki-clad figure wrenched furiously at the deadly tube as they struggled and swayed on the edge of the cliff.

He freed his arm quickly, and, regardless of the clawing thing that tore at his face and eyes, he launched one long swing for the horrible face above him. He saw the awkward fall of a lean body, and he swayed helplessly out to follow when the grip of Sykes' hand pulled him back and up to momentary safety.

McGuire's mind held only the desire to kill, and he would have begun a staggering rush toward the shrieking mob that broke from the cover behind them, had not Sykes held him fast. At sight of the weapon, their own gas projector, still clutched in the flyer's hand, the pursuers halted. Their long arms pointed and their shrill calls joined in a chorus that quavered and fell uncertainly.

ONE, braver than the rest, dashed forward and discharged his weapon. The spurting gas failed to reach its intended victims; it blew gently back toward the others who fled quickly to either side. Above the trees a giant ship nosed swiftly down, and McGuire pointed to it grimly and in silence. The men before them were massed now for a rush.

"This is the end," said the flyer softly. "I wonder how this devilish thing works; there's a trigger here. I will give them a shot with the wind helping, then we'll jump for it."

The ship was above them as the slim figure of Lieutenant McGuire threw itself a score of paces toward the waiting group. From the metal tube there shot a stream of pale vapor that swept downward upon the others who ran in panic from its touch.

Then back—and a grip of a hand!—and two Earth-men who threw themselves out and downward from a sheer rock wall to the cool embrace of deep water.

They came to the top, battered from their fall, but able to dive under a wave and emerge again near one another.

"Swim!" urged Sykes. "Swim out! They may get us here—recover our bodies—resuscitate us. And that wouldn't do!"

Another wave, and the two men were swimming beyond it; swimming feebly but steadily out from shore, while above them a great cylinder of shining metal swept past in a circling flight. They kept on while their eyes, from the wave tops, saw it turn and come slowly back in a long smooth descent.

It was a hundred feet above the water a short way out at sea, and the two men made feeble motions with

arms and legs, while their eyes exchanges glances of dismay.

A DOOR had opened in the round under-surface, and a figure, whose gas-suit made it a bloated caricature of a man, was lowered from beneath in a sling. From the stern of the ship gaseous vapor belched downward to spread upon the surface of the water. The wind was bringing the misty cloud toward them. "The gas!" said McGuire despairingly. "It will knock us out, and then that devil will get us! They'll take us back! Our last chance —gone!"

"God help us!" said Sykes weakly. "We can't—even—die—" His feeble strokes stopped, and he sank beneath the water. McGuire's last picture as he too, sank and the waters closed over his head, was the shining ship hovering beyond.

He wondered only vaguely at the sudden whirling of water around him. A solid something was rising beneath his dragging feet; a firm, solid support that raised him again to the surface. He realized dimly the air about him, the sodden form of Professor Sykes some few feet distant. His numbed brain was trying to comprehend what else the eyes beheld.

A metal surface beneath them rose higher, shining wet, above the water; a metal tube raised suddenly from its shield, to swing in quick aim upon the enemy ship approaching from above.

His eyes moved to the ship, and to the man-thing below in the sling. Its clothes were a mass of flame, and the figure itself was falling headlong through the air. Above the blazing body was the metal of the ship itself, and it sagged and melted to a liquid fire that poured, splashing and hissing, to the waters beneath. In the wild panic the great shape threw itself into the air; it swept out and up in curving flight to plunge headlong into the depths. . . .

The gas was drifting close, as McGuire saw an opening in the structure beside him. The voice of a man, human, kindly, befriending, said something of "hurry" and "gas," and "lift them carefully but make haste." The white faces of men were blurred and indistinct as McGuire felt himself lowered into a cool room and laid, with the unconscious form of Sykes, upon a floor.

He tried to remember. He had gone down in the water — Sykes had drowned, and he himself—he was tired —tired. "And this,"—the thought seemed a certainty in his mind—"this is death. How—very—peculiar—" He was trying to twist his lips to a weak laugh as the lighted ports in the wall beside him changed from gold to green, then black—and a rushing of torn waters was in his ears. . . .

(To be continued)

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"Thank you, Doctor, but I'm not a captain. My name is Mitchell and I am, or was, the first mate of the *Arethusa*."

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"I believe that I am the only one."

"Where have you been hiding and why haven't you reported the fact of your rescue to the proper authorities? Tell the truth; I'm a federal officer!"

Carnes flashed the gold badge of the Secret Service and an expression of anger crossed Mitchell's face.

"If I had wished to talk to an officer I could have found plenty in New York," he said shortly. "I came to Washington in order to tell my story to Dr. Bird."

The seaman and the detective glared at one another for a moment and then Dr. Bird intervened.

"Pipe down, Carnes," he said softly. "Mr. Mitchell undoubtedly has reasons, excellent reasons, for his actions. Sit down, Mr. Mitchell, and have a cigar."

MITCHELL accepted the cigar which the doctor proferred and took a chair. He lighted the weed and after another glance of hostility toward the detective he pointedly ignored him and addressed his remarks to Dr. Bird.

"I have no objection to telling you why I haven't spoken earlier, Doctor," he said. "When the *Arethusa* sank, I must have hit my head on something, for the next thing I knew, I was in the Marine Hospital in New York. I had been picked up unconscious by a fishing boat and brought in, and I lay there a week before I knew anything. When I knew what I was doing I heard about the loss of my ship and was told that there were no survivors, and I didn't know what to do. The story I had to tell was so weird and improbable that I hesitated to speak to any one about it. I was not sure at first that it was not a trick of a disordered brain, but since my head has cleared I am convinced of the truth of it . . and yet I know that it *can't* be so. I have read about you and some of the things you have done, and so as soon as I was able to travel I came here to tell you about it. You will be better able to judge than I, whether what I tell you really happened or was only a vision."

Dr. Bird leaned back in his chair and put the tips of his fingers together. Long, tapering fingers they were, sensitive and well shaped, though sadly marred by acid stains. It was in his hands alone that Dr. Bird showed the genius in his make-up, the artistry which inspired him to produce those miracles of experimentation which had made his name a household word in the realm of science. Aside from those hands he more resembled a pugilist than a scientist. A heavy shock of unruly black hair surmounted a face with beetling black brows and a prognathous jaw. His enormous head, with a breadth and height of forehead which were amazing, rose from a pillar-like neck which sprang from a pair of massive shoulders and the arching chest of the trained athlete. Dr. Bird stood six feet two inches in his socks, and weighed over two hundred stripped. As he leaned back a curious glitter, which Carnes had learned to associate with keen interest, showed for an instant in his eyes.

"I will be glad to hear your story, Mr. Mitchell," he said softly. "Tell it in your own way and try not to omit any detail, no matter how trivial it may be."

THE seaman nodded and sat silent for a moment as though marshaling his thoughts.

"The story really starts the afternoon of May 12th," he said, "although I didn't realize the importance of the first incident at the time. We were steaming along at good speed, hoping to make New York before too late for quarantine, when a hail came from the forward lookout. I was on watch and I went forward to see what was the matter. The lookout was Louis Green, an able bodied seaman and a good one, but a confirmed drunkard. I asked him what the trouble was and he turned to-

ward me a face that was haggard with terror.

"'I've seen a sea serpent, Mr. Mitchell,' he said.

"'Nonsense!' I replied sharply. 'You've been drinking again.'

"He swore that he hadn't and I asked him to describe what he had seen. His teeth were chattering so that he could hardly speak, but he gasped out a story about seeing a monstrous head, a half mile across, he said, with a long snake body stretching out over the sea until the end of it was lost on the horizon. I turned my glass in the direction he pointed and of course there was nothing to be seen. The man's condition was such as to make him worse than useless as a lookout, so I relieved him and ordered him below. I took it for a touch of delirium tremens.

"We were bucking a head wind, although not a very stiff one, and we didn't make port until after dark, so we anchored at quarantine, just off Staten Island, in forty fathoms of water, and Captain Murphy radioed for a Coast Guard boat to come out and lay by us for the night. As you have probably heard, we were carrying four millions in bar gold consigned to the Federal Reserve Bank of New York from the Bank of England."

DR. BIRD and Carnes nodded. The inexplicable loss of the *Arethusa* had occupied much space in the papers ten days earlier.

"The cutter came out, signalled, and dropped anchor about three hundred yards away. So far, everything was exactly as it should be. I walked to the stern of the boat and looked out across the Atlantic and then I realized that Green wasn't the only one who could see things. The wind had fallen and it was getting pretty dark, but not too dark to see things a pretty good distance away. As I looked I saw, or thought I saw, a huge black leathery mass come to the surface a mile or so away. There were two things on it that looked like eyes, and I had a feeling as though some malignant thing was staring at me. I rubbed my eyes and looked again, but the vision persisted, and I went forward to get a glass. When I came back the thing, whatever it was, had disappeared, but the water where it had been was boiling as though there were a great spring, or something of the sort under the surface.

"I trained my glass on the disturbed area, and I will take my oath that I saw a huge body like a snake emerge from the water. It lay in long undulations on the waves, and moved with them as though it were floating. It was quite a bit nearer than the first thing had been and I could see it plainly with the glass. I would judge it to be fifteen or twenty feet thick, and it actually seemed to disappear in the distance as Green had described it. The sight of the thing sent shivers up and down my spine, and I gave a hoarse shout. The lookout hurried to my side and asked me what the trouble was. I pointed and handed him the glass. He looked through it and handed it back to me with a curious expression.

"'I can't see nothing, sir,' he said.

"I took the glass from him and tried to level it but my hands were trembling so that I was forced to rest it on the rail. The lookout was right. There was absolutely nothing to be seen and the peculiar appearance of the sea had subsided to normal. The lookout was staring at me rather curiously and I knew that he was thinking the same thing about me as I had thought about Green in the afternoon. I made some kind of an excuse and went below to pull myself together. I caught a glimpse of myself in the glass. I was as white as a sheet, and the sweat was running off my face in drops.

"I SHOOK myself together after a fashion and managed to persuade myself that the whole thing was just a trick of my mind, inspired by Green's vivid description of his delirious vision of the afternoon. Eight bells struck,

and when Mr. Fulton, the junior officer, relieved me, I laid down and tried to quiet myself. I didn't have much luck. Just before I took the deck again at midnight I slipped down to the forecastle to see how Green was coming along. He was lying in his bunk, wide awake, with staring eyes.

"'How are you feeling now, Green?' I asked.

"He looked up at me with an expression of a man who has looked death in the face.

"'Ain't there no chance of dockin' to-night, Mr. Mitchell?' he asked.

"'Of course not,' I said rather sharply. 'What's the matter with you? Are you afraid your sea serpent will get us?'

"'He'll get us if we stay out here to-night, sir,' he replied with an air of conviction. 'I saw the horrible mouth on him, large enough to bite this ship in half; and it had a beak like a bird, like a bloody parrot, sir. I saw its horrible body, too, with great black ulcers on the under side of it where the sharks had been after it. For all the shark takes a man now and then, he's the seaman's friend, sir, because he kills off the sea serpents who would take ship and all.'

"'Nonsense, Green!' I said sharply. 'Don't talk any more such foolishness or I'll have you ironed. You've been drinking so much that you are seeing things, and I won't have the crew disturbed by your crazy talk.'

"'You won't think it's talk when those big eyes stare into yours to-night, Mr. Mitchell, and that body twists around you and squeezes the life out of you. I don't care whether you iron me or not; I know that I'm doomed and so is everyone else; but I won't talk about it, sir. The crew might as well rest easy while they can, for there's no escape if we have to stay out here to-night.'

"'Well, be sure you keep a tight mouth then,' I said, and left rather hurriedly. I was in a cold sweat, for his air of conviction, together with what I had seen, had shaken me pretty badly. I heard the watch changing up above, and knew there would be men in the forecastle in a minute. I didn't want to face them right then.

"MR. FULTON reported every thing quiet when I went on deck to relieve him, and although I surveyed the water through a night glass for as far as I could see, there was nothing out of the way. The Coast Guard's lights were shining less than a quarter of a mile away, and things looked peaceful enough. The wind had gone down with the sun; the sea was almost glassy, and there was a bright moon.

"After going around the ship, I relieved all of the watch except two men for lookouts, and sent them below to get a good night's sleep. If I hadn't done that, some of them might be alive now.

"I paced the deck for an hour trying to quiet my nerves, but really getting more nervous every minute. Three bells struck and I walked forward and leaned on the rail to watch the water. I saw a peculiar swirl as though some large body were coming to the surface from below, and then I saw—it.

"Dr. Bird, I take a drink once in a while when I am on shore, but never at sea and never in excess, and I know it wasn't a vision of drink delirium. I felt perfectly normal aside from my nervousness, and I don't think it was fever. Either I saw it or I am insane, for it is as vivid to me as though I were standing on the *Arethusa's* deck and that monstrous horror was rising once more before my eyes."

The seaman's face had become drawn and white as he talked, and drops of sweat were trickling from his chin. Carnes sat forward absorbed in his narrative while Dr. Bird sat back with a glitter in his black eyes and an expression of great attention on his face.

"Go on, Mr. Mitchell," the doctor said soothingly. "Tell me just what you saw."

MITCHELL shuddered and glanced quickly around the laboratory as though to assure himself that he was safe within four walls.

"From the surface of the sea," he went on, "rose a massive body, black, and of the appearance of wet leather. It must have been a couple of hundred yards across, although the size of objects is often magnified by moonlight and my terror may have added to its size. In the midst of it were two great discs, thirty feet across, which glowed red with the reflected moonlight. It stared for a moment and then rose higher until it towered above the ship; and then I saw, or thought I saw, a huge gaping beak like a parrot's. It was as Green had described it, large enough to bite the *Arethusa* in half, and she was a ship of three thousand tons.

"I was frozen with horror and couldn't move or cry out. As I watched, I saw the long snake-like body emerge from the water, and the estimate I had made of the size in the afternoon seemed pitifully inadequate. Presently a second and a third snake arose from the water, and then more, until the whole sea and the air above it seemed a writhing mass of huge snakes. I remember wondering why the watch of the Coast Guard cutter didn't sound an alarm, and then I realized that the thing had arisen on our port side and the cutter was on the starboard.

"The mass of snakes writhed backward and forward, and then two of them rose in the air and hung over the ship. I could see the under side and I saw what Green had called the scars where the sharks had attacked. They were great cup-shaped depressions with vile white edges, and they did resemble huge sores or ulcers. They wavered over the ship for an instant, and then both of them dropped down on the deck.

"I found my voice and I think that I gave a yell, but even as I opened my mouth, I realized the futility of it. The *Arethusa* was sucked down into the sea as though it had been a tiny chip. I saw the water rising to the rail, and I think I cried out again. The ship tilted and I felt myself falling. The next thing I knew was when I was in the hospital and was told that I had been raving for a week. I was afraid to tell my story for fear I would be put in an asylum, so I kept a tight tongue in my head until I was discharged."

DR. BIRD mused for a moment as the seaman's voice stopped.

"You cried out all right, Mr. Mitchell," he said. "You gave two distinct shouts, both of which were heard by the watch on the *Wren*, the Coast Guard cutter. They reported that at 1:30, the *Arethusa* sank without warning. As soon as he heard your shouts, the watch gave the alarm and the crew piled on deck. The *Arethusa* was gone completely and the *Wren* was tossing about like 'a chip in a whirlpool' as they graphically described it. The *Wren* had steam up and they fought the waves and steamed over your anchoring ground looking for survivors, but they found none. The sea gradually subsided and they did the only thing they could do—dropped a buoy, to guide the salvage people, and radioed for assistance. The *Robin* came out and joined them, and both cutters stood by until daylight, but nothing unusual was seen. The insurance people are trying to salvage the wreck now, but so far they have made little headway."

"That brings me to the rest of the story, the part that made me decide to come to you, Doctor," said the seaman. "Did you see what happened to the divers yesterday?"

Dr. Bird nodded.

"I saw a brief account of it," he said. "It seems that two of them were lost through their lines getting fouled and their air connections severed in some way. I don't believe the bodies have been recovered yet."

"They never will be recovered, Doctor. I was discharged from the hospital yesterday and the papers were just out with an account of it. I went down to the dock where the *John MacLean*, the salvage ship, ties up, and I talked to Captain Starley who commands it. I have known him casually for some years, although not intimately, and he gave me a few more details than the press got. He didn't connect me up at first with the Mitchell who was reported lost on the *Arethusa*.

"The first man to go down from the *MacLean* was Charley Melrose, an expert diver. He went down in a pressure outfit to the bottom and started to work. Everything was going along fine until the telephone suddenly rang and the man who answered it heard him say, 'Raise me, for God's sake! Hurry!' The signal for raising was given, but they hadn't got him more than thirty feet from the bottom before there came a tug on the line and he was gone! The air line, the lifting cable and the telephone cord floated free and were reeled in. Melrose had been plucked off the end of that line as you or I would pluck off a grape."

DR. BIRD leaned forward with the curious glitter again in his eye.

"Go on," he said tersely.

"Blake, the other diver, donned a suit and insisted on being lowered at once. Starley tried to dissuade him but he insisted on going down. They lowered him over the side with a twelve-foot steel-shod pike in his hand. He never got to the bottom. He had not been lowered more than a hundred feet when a scream came over the telephone, and again there was a jerk on the lines which threatened to wreck the reel—and the line came aboard with no diver on the end of it. At the same time, Starley told me, the sea boiled and churned as though the whole bottom were coming up, and his ship was tossed about as though it were in a violent storm, although it was calm enough for forty fathom salvage work and that is pretty quiet, you know. Half the time his screws were out of water and he had a hard time to keep from being capsized. He fought his way out of the disturbed area, and as soon as he did, it started to quiet down, and in ten minutes it was calm again.

"Starley was pretty badly shaken and besides he had lost both of his divers, so he came in and I saw him at the dock. When I heard his yarn, I took him into my confidence and told him what I had seen and that I proposed coming to you and asking your advice. I was afraid until I heard his story that it was merely a vision that I had had, but it certainly was no vision that plucked those two divers off their lines."

"Has Captain Starley told that story to anyone else yet?"

"No, Doctor, he hasn't. He promised not to talk until after I had seen you. I'll vouch for him; he'll keep his word through anything; and he is keeping his whole crew on board until he hears from me."

DR. BIRD sprang to his feet.

"Mr. Mitchell," he said energetically, "you have shown excellent judgment. Wire Captain Starley that you have seen me and that he is to hold his crew on board and to talk to no one until I get there. Carnes, telephone the Chief of Naval Operations and ask him to receive me in conference at once. Have him get the Secretary of the Navy in, too, if he is available. When you have finished that, telephone Bolton that you will be away from Washington indefinitely."

"I'll telephone Admiral Buck for you, Doctor, but I don't dare telephone any such message to Bolton; he'd take my head off. He has been running the whole service ragged lately, and this is my first afternoon off duty in a fortnight."

"What's the trouble, a flood of new counterfeits?"

"No, the counterfeit division is getting along all right. In point of fact, they have lent us a dozen men. The trouble is a sudden big increase in Communist activity throughout the country, with the Young Labor party behind it. Bolton has been pretty jumpy since that Stokowski affair last August and he is afraid of another attempt of some sort on the President."

"The Young Labor party? I thought that gang was bankrupt and out of business, since the Coast Guard broke up their alien smuggling scheme."

"They were down and out for a while, but they are in funds again—and how! They must have three or four millions at least."

"Where did they get it?"

"That's what we have been trying to find out. The leaders have presented bars of gold to a dozen banks throughout the country and demanded specie. The banks shipped the gold to the mint and it was good gold, nine hundred and twenty-five fine. What we are trying to find out is how that gold got into the United States."

"A shipment of that size should be easy to trace."

"It would seem so, but it hasn't been. We have accounted for every pound of every shipment that has come in through a port of entry, and we have checked almost that close on the output of every mine in the United States. If the gold came from Russia, it would have had to cross Europe, and we can't get any trace of it from abroad. It looks as though they were *making* it."

DR. BIRD rubbed his head thoughtfully.

"Possible, but hardly probable," he said. "How much did you say they had?"

"Over three millions in thirty-pound bars. Each bar shows signs of having a mint mark chiselled off, but that don't help much for they have done too good a job. It has us pretty well bluffed."

Again Dr. Bird rubbed his head.

"Telephone Admiral Buck, and then phone Bolton and tell him exactly what I told you to: that you will be away indefinitely. When he gets through exploding, tell him that you are going with me and that possibly, just barely possibly, we might be on the trail of that gold shipment."

"On the trail of the gold!" gasped Carnes, "Surely, Doctor, you 'don't think—"

"Once in a while, old dear," replied the Doctor with a chuckle, "which is more than any one in the Secret Service does. You might tell Bolton that I said that, but hang up quickly if you do. I don't want the wires of my telephone melted off. No, Carnesy, I have no miraculous inspiration as to where that gold is coming from; I just have a plain old-fashioned hunch, and that hunch is that we are going to have lots of fun and more than our share of danger before we see Washington again. After you get through bearding Bolton in his den, you might call the Chief of the Air Corps and ask him to have a bomber held at Langley Field subject to my orders. If he squawks any, I'll talk to him."

He turned to a telephone which stood on his desk and lifted the receiver.

"Get Mr. Lambertson on the wire," he said. "He is the chief technician of the Pyrex Glass Works at Corning, New Jersey."

THE *U.S.S. Minneconsin* steamed out of New York harbor and headed down toward the lower bay. On her forward deck rested a huge globe. The bottom quarter of the sphere was made of some dark opaque substance but the upper portion was transparent as crystal. Through the walls could be seen a quantity of apparatus resting on the opaque bottom portion. Two mechanics from the Bureau of Standards were making final adjustments of one of the pieces of apparatus, which resembled a tank

fitted with a piston geared to an electric motor. From the tank, tubes ran to four hollow pipes, an inch and a half in diameter, which ran through the skin and extended thirty inches from the outer skin of the twenty-foot sphere. Dr. Bird stood near talking with the executive officer of the ship and from time to time giving a brief word of direction to the mechanics.

"It's safer than you might think, Commander," he said. "In the first place, that globe is not made of ordinary glass; it is made of vitrilene, a new semi-malleable glass which was developed at the Bureau and which is being made on an experimental scale for us by the Pyrex people. It is much stronger than ordinary glass, and is not sensitive to shock. It is also perfectly transparent to ultra-violet light, being superior even to rock crystal or fused quartz in that respect. The walls, as you have noticed, are four inches thick, and I have calculated that the ball will stand a uniform external pressure of thirty-five hundred atmospheres, the pressure which would be encountered at a depth of about twenty miles. I believe that it will stand a squeeze of six thousand tons without buckling, and it is impossible to fracture it by shock. It could be dropped from the top of the Woolworth Building, and it would just bounce."

"It seems incredible that it could stand such a pressure as you have named."

"My figures are conservative ones. Lambertson calculated them even higher, but we allowed for the fact that this is the first large mass of the material to be cast, and lowered them."

"BUT suppose your lifting cable should break?" objected the naval officer. "The outfit weighs a good many tons."

"You notice that the lower quarter is made of lead. The specific gravity of the entire globe when sealed up tight with two men in it is only a little more than unity. In the water its weight is so little that a three-inch manilla hawser would raise it, let alone a steel cable. I have another safety device. Granted that the cable should snap, I can detach the lead from it and it would shoot to the surface like a rocket."

"How long can you remain under water in it?"

"A week, if necessary. I have an oxygen tank and a carbon dioxide removing apparatus which will keep the air in good condition. The globe is electrically lighted, and can be heated if necessary. Should my telephone line become fouled and broken, I have a radio set which will enable me to communicate with you. I can't see that it is especially dangerous; not nearly as much so as a submarine."

"What is your object in going down, if I may ask?"

"To take pictures and to explore the wreck if we can. The globe is equipped with huge floodlights and excellent cameras. The salvage people are having a little trouble and we are trying to help them out."

"You mentioned exploring. Can you leave the globe while it is under water?"

"Yes. There is a locking device for doing so. A man in a diving suit can enter the lock and fill it with water. Once the external pressure is released he can open the outer door and step out. Coming back, he seals the outer door and the man inside blows out the lock and compressed air and then the inner door can be opened. It is the same principle as a torpedo tube."

A JANGLE of bells interrupted them and the *Minneconsin* slowed down. Commander Lawrence stepped to the rail and gave a sharp order to the navigating officer on the bridge. The bells jangled again and the ship's engines stopped.

"We are almost over the buoy, Doctor," he said.

Dr. Bird nodded and spoke to the two mechanics. With a few final

touches to the apparatus they emerged from the globe and Dr. Bird entered.

"Come on, Carnes," he called. "No backing out at the last minute."

Carnes stepped forward with a sickly smile and joined the Doctor in the huge sphere.

"All right, boys; close her up."

The mechanics swung the outer door into place with a crane. Both the edge of the door and the surface against which it fitted had been ground flat and were in addition faced with soft rubber. Bolts were fastened in the door which passed through holes in the main sphere, and Dr. Bird spun nuts onto them and tightened them with a heavy wrench. He and Carnes lifted the smaller inner door into place and bolted it tight. Dr. Bird stepped to the telephone.

"Lower away," he directed.

From a boom attached to the *Minneconsin's* forward fighting top, a huge steel cable swung down, and the latch at the end of the cable was closed over a vitrilene ring which was fastened to the top of the sphere. The cable tightened and the globe with the two men in it was lifted over the side of the battleship and lowered gently into the water. Carnes involuntarily ducked and threw up his hand as the waters closed over them. Dr. Bird laughed.

"Look up, Carnes," he said.

Carnes gasped as he looked up and saw the surface of the water above him. Dr. Bird laughed again and turned to the telephone.

"Lower away," he said. "Everything is tight."

THE globe descended into the depths of the sea. Darker and darker it grew until only a faint twilight glow filled the sphere. A dark bulk loomed before them. Dr. Bird snapped on one of his huge floodlights and pointed.

"The *Arethusa*," he said.

The ill-fated vessal lay on her side with a huge jagged hole torn in her fabric amidships.

"That's where her boilers burst," explained the Doctor. "Luckily we have a hard bottom to deal with. Let's see if we can locate any of Mitchell's sea serpents."

He turned on other flood lights and swept the bottom of the sea with them. The huge beams bored out into the water for a quarter of a mile, but nothing unusual was to be seen. Dr. Bird turned his attention again to the wreck.

"Things look normal from this side," he said after a prolonged scrutiny. "I'll have the *Minneconsin* steam around it while we look it over."

In response to his telephone orders the ship above them swung around the wreck in a circle, and Carnes and the Doctor viewed each side in turn. But nothing of a suspicious nature made its appearance. The sphere stopped opposite the hole in the side and Dr. Bird turned to Carnes.

"I'm going to put on a diving suit and explore that wreck," he said. "If there ever was any danger, it isn't apparent now; and I can't find out anything until I get inside."

"Don't do it, Doctor!" cried Carnes. "Remember what happened to the other divers!"

"WE don't know what happened to them, Carnes. No matter what it was, there is no danger apparent right now, and I've got to get into that ship before I can get any real information. We could have lowered an under-sea camera and learned as much as we have so far."

"Let me go instead of you, Doctor."

"I'm sorry to refuse you, old dear, but frankly, I wouldn't trust your judgment as to what you had seen if you went alone; and we can't both go."

"Why not?"

"If we both went, who would work the air to let us back in? No, this is a one-man job and I'm the one to do it. While I am gone, keep a sharp lookout, and if you see anything unusual call me at once."

"How can I call you?"

"On this small radio phone. A pair of receivers tuned to the right wavelength are in my diving helmet, and I will be able to hear you although I can't reply. I won't be gone long: I have only a small air tank, large enough to keep me going for thirty minutes. Now help me into my suit and keep a sharp watch. A timely warning may save my life if anything happens."

With Carnes' assistance, Dr. Bird donned a deep-sea diving outfit and screwed down the helmet. He crawled through the inner door into the lock and lifted the inner door into place. Carnes fastened the door with nuts and the Doctor opened a pair of valves in the outer door and filled the lock with water. He removed the outer door; and, taking in one hand a steel-shod twelve-foot pike with a hook on the end, and in the other a waterproof flashlight, he sallied forth. As he left the shell he paused for a moment, and then returned and picked up the heavy wrench with which he had removed the nuts holding the outer door into place. He fastened the tool to the belt of his suit. Then, with a wave of his hand toward the detective, he approached the hulk.

The hole in the side was too high for him to reach, but he hooked the end of his pike in one of the joints of the *Arethusa's* plates and climbed slowly and painfully up the side of the vessel. As he disappeared into the hull, Carnes realized with a sudden start that he had been watching his friend and neglecting the duty imposed on him of keeping a sharp watch. He turned quickly to the floodlights and searched the sea bottom.

NOTHING appeared, and the minutes moved as slowly as hours should. Carnes felt that he had been submerged alone for weeks, and his nerves grew so tense that he felt that he would scream in another instant. A sudden thought sobered him like a dash of cold water. If he screamed, Dr. Bird would take it for an alarm signal and possibly be afraid to emerge from the vessel. His watch showed him that the Doctor had been gone for twenty-five minutes and he moved slowly to the radio transmitter.

"Dr. Bird," he said slowly and distinctly, "you have been gone nearly thirty minutes. Nothing alarming has appeared but I will feel better when I see you coming back."

He glued his eyes on the opening in the ship's side and waited. Five minutes passed, and then ten, with no signs of the Doctor. Carnes moved again to the receiver.

"It has been over half an hour, Doctor," he cried in a pleading voice. "If you are all right, for God's sake show yourself. I am frantic with worry."

Another five minutes passed, and the sweat dripped in a steady stream from the detective's chin. Suddenly he gave a sob of relief and sank back against the side of the globe. A bulky figure showed at the edge of the hole, and Dr. Bird climbed slowly and heavily out of the hold and dropped to the sea bottom. He lay prone for a moment before he rose and made his way with evident effort toward the sphere. He entered the compartment and with a heroic effort lifted the outer door into place, and feebly and with fumbling fingers placed nuts on the bolts. His hands wandered uncertainly toward the valves and closed the upper one. He waved his hand toward Carnes and sank in a heap on the floor of the lock.

WITH trembling hands Carnes connected the air and opened the valve. Air flowed into the lock and the water was gradually forced out. When the lock was empty, he waited for Dr. Bird to close the outer valve but the Doctor did not move. Carnes tore at the bolts which held the inner door and threw his weight against it. It held against his assault, and he thought frantically. An inspiration came to him, and he discon-

nected the air valve. With a whistling rush, the air from the lock rushed into the sphere and he forced open the inner door. A stream of sea water drove against his feet through the open valve, and he reached for the valve to close it. The force of the water held it open for a moment, but he threw every ounce of his strength into the effort. The valve slowly closed.

It was beyond his strength to haul the heavy Doctor with his pressure diving suit through the restricted confines of the inner door, so Carnes wormed his way into the lock and with trembling fingers unscrewed the helmet of the Doctor's diving suit. The helmet clanged to the floor and Carnes scooped up his hands full of water and dashed it into the Doctor's face. There was no response and he was at his wit's end. He sprang for the radio to order the sphere hauled up when his glance fell on the oxygen tank. It took him only a moment to connect a rubber hose to the tank, and in a few seconds a blast of the life-giving gas was blowing into the scientist's face. Dr. Bird gave a convulsive gasp or two and opened his eyes.

"Shut off the juice, Carnes," he said faintly. "Too much of that's bad."

Carnes shut off the oxygen and Dr. Bird struggled to a sitting position and inhaled deep breaths.

"That was a narrow squeak, old dear," he said faintly. "Give me a hand and I'll climb in."

WITH the detective's aid he climbed into the sphere and Carnes fastened the inner door. Slowly the Doctor rid himself of the diving suit and lay prone on the floor, his breath still coming in gasps.

"Thanks for your warning about the time, Carnes," he said. "I knew that my air supply was running short but I was caught down there and couldn't readily free myself. I thought for a while that my time had come, but it wasn't so written. By the looks of things, I freed myself just in time."

"Did you find out anything?" asked the detective eagerly.

"I did," replied Dr. Bird grimly. "For one thing, the gold is no longer in the hold of the *Arethusa*."

"It's gone?"

"Clean as a whistle, every bar of it. A hole has been cut in the vault around the combination, and the bars slid back and the door opened. The gold has been stolen."

"Might it not have been stolen before the vessel sank?"

"The idea occurred to me of course, and I examined things pretty carefully. I know that the theft occurred after the vessel sank."

"How could you tell?"

"For one thing, the hole was cut with an under-water cutting torch. For the second, look here."

THE Doctor rolled up his trousers and showed the detective his leg. Carnes cried out as he saw huge purple welts on it.

"What caused that?" he cried.

"As I entered the vault, I stepped full into a steel bear trap which was set there for the purpose of catching and holding anyone who entered. Some one has visited the *Arethusa*, since she sank, and looted her, and also arranged so that any diver who got as far as the vault would never return to the surface to tell of it. Luckily for myself, I carried a heavy wrench and was able to free myself. Most divers don't carry such a thing."

"But who could have done it?"

"That's what we have got to find out, and we aren't going to do it down here. Give the word to have us hauled up; and, Carnes, don't mention anything about the looting of the vessel. Allow it to be understood that I couldn't get into the hold. We'll head back for New York at once. I want to have a few small changes made in this sphere before we use it again. While I am doing that, I want you to get hold of the Coast Guard or the Immigration Service or whoever it is that has the

complete records in that case of alien smuggling, by the Young Labor party. When you get the information, report to me and we'll go over it. You might also drop a hint to Captain Starley that will stop all further attempts at salvage operations for a few days. Tell him that I'll arrange to have a Coast Guard cutter guard the locality of the wreck."

"Won't that be rather risky for the cutter?"

"I think not. The gold is gone and there is no reason to apprehend any further danger in that locality, at least for the present."

AT nine o'clock next morning Carnes and Dr. Bird sat in the office of Lieutenant Commander Minden of the United States Coast Guard, listening intently to the history of the alien smuggling case. Commander Minden was saying:

"Their boats would load up and clear ostensibly for Rio de Janeiro or some other South American port, but once they were in the Atlantic, they would alter their course and head from the Massachusetts coast. Of course, we had no right to interfere with them on the high seas, and they never came closer than fifty miles of our coast line. When they got that close, they would cruise slowly back and forth for a few days and then steam away south to the port they had cleared for. When they got there, of course there were no passengers on board.

"We patrolled the coast carefully while they were around but we never got any indication of any landing of aliens and yet we knew they were being landed in some way. We drew lines so close that a cork couldn't get by without being seen and we even had the air patrolled, but with no results. Eventually the air patrol was the thing that gave them away.

"They had been operating so successfully that they evidently got careless and started a load off late in the night so they didn't reach the coast by dawn. A Navy plane was flying along the coast-line about twelve miles off when they spotted a submarine running parallel with the coast, headed north. It didn't look like an American craft and they went on and radioed Washington and found that we had no under-sea craft in that neighborhood. They returned to their patrol and followed the sub for a matter of thirty or forty miles up the coast, and then it turned in right toward the shore. The shore line there is rocky, and, at the point where the sub was heading, it falls sheer about two hundred fathoms. The sub ran right at the cliff and disappeared from view."

LIEUTENANT COMMANDER MINDEN paused impressively. Carnes and Dr. Bird set forward in their chairs, for it was evident that the crux of the story was at hand.

"When the plane reported what they had seen, we knew how those aliens were being landed. The point where the sub went in gave us a good idea of the location of their base and we threw a cordon of men around and searched. A Navy sub was sent to the scene and they reported that there was a tunnel opening into the rock, about a hundred fathoms under water, running for they had no idea how far under the land. They stayed to guard the hole while we combed the land. It took us a week to locate the place, but we traced some truck loads of food and finally found it. This tunnel ran under the land for a mile and then ended in a large cave underground. The Young Labor party had established a regular receiving depot there, and took the aliens from the sub and kept them for a day or two until they had a chance to load them into trucks and run them into Boston or some other town in the night.

"Once we had the place spotted, we sent a gang in and captured the whole works without any trouble. The underground cavern had no natural opening to the surface, but one had been made

by blasting. We captured the whole lot and then sealed the end of the hole with rock and concrete. That was the end of the affair."

"Thank you, Commander; you have given us a very graphic description of it. I suppose you could find the entrance which was sealed up?"

"EASILY. I led the raiding party. I forgot to mention one blunder we made. Evidently some word of our plans leaked out, for the sub which was guarding the outer end of the tunnel was called away by a radio message supposed to be from the Navy Department. It had gone only a short distance, however, when the commander smelled a rat and made his way back. He was too late. He was just in time to see the sub emerge from the hole and head into the open sea. He gave chase, but the other sub was faster than the Navy boat and it got clear away. The leader of the gang must have been on it, for we didn't get him."

"Who was the leader?"

"From some records we captured, his name was Ivan Saranoff. I never saw him."

"Saranoff?" said Dr. Bird thoughtfully. "The name seems familiar. Where have I— Thunder! I know now. He was at one time a member of the faculty of St. Petersburg. He was one of the leading biologists of his time. Carnes, we've found our man."

"If you are thinking of Saranoff, I am afraid you are mistaken, Doctor," said Commander Minden. "Neither he nor his submarine have ever been heard of since and it has been generally conceded that they were lost at sea. We had some pretty rough weather just after that affair."

"Rough weather doesn't mean much to a sub, Commander. I expect that he's our man. At any rate, the place we want to go is the end of that tunnel."

"I'm at your service, Doctor."

"Carnes, get the location of that tunnel entrance from Commander Minden and order the *Minneconsin* to proceed north along the coast to that vicinity and stand by for radio orders. I am going to telephone Mitchell Field and get a plane. We have no time to lose."

THE plane from Mitchell Field roared down to a landing, and Carnes, Dr. Bird and Commander Minden dismounted from the rear cockpit and looked around. They had landed in a smooth field at the base of a rise almost rugged enough to be called a mountain. A group of three men were standing near them as they got out of the plane. One of the men approached.

"Dr. Bird?" asked the newcomer. "I am Tom Harron, United States Marshal. These two men are deputies. I understand that I am to report to you for orders."

"I'm glad to know you, Mr. Harron. This is Operative Carnes of the Secret Service and Commander Minden of the Coast Guard. We are going to explore an underground cavern that is located in this vicinity."

"Do you mean the one where they used to smuggle aliens? That is closed up. I was in charge of that work and we closed it tight as a drum two years ago."

"Can you find the entrance?"

"Sure. It isn't over a mile from here."

"Lead the way, then. We want to take a look at it."

The marshal led the way toward the eminence and took a path which led up a gully in its side. He paused for a moment to take his bearings and then turned sharply to his left and climbed part way up the side of the ravine.

"Here it is," he announced. An expression of astonishment crossed his face and he examined the ground closely. "By Golly, Doc," he went on as he straightened up, "this place has been opened since I left it!"

DR BIRD hurried forward and joined him. The heavy stone and concrete with which the entrance to

the cavern had been sealed were undisturbed, but in the side of the hill was set a steel door beside the concrete. There was no sign of a keyhole or other means of entering it.

"Was this steel door part of your work?" asked Carnes.

"No, sir, it wasn't. We sealed it solid. That door has been put there since."

Dr. Bird closely examined the structure. He tapped it and went around the edges and then straightened up and took a small pocket compass from his pocket and opened the case. The needle swung crazily for a moment and then pointed straight toward the door.

"A magnetic lock," he exclaimed. "If we could find the power line it would be easy to force, but finding that line might take us a week. At any rate, we have found out what we were after. This is their base from which they are operating. Mr. Harron, I want you to station a guard armed with rifles at this door day and night until I personally relieve you. Remember, until I relieve you, in person. Verbal or written orders don't go. Capture or kill anyone who tries to enter or leave the cavern through this entrance. Just now we'll find that cavern more vulnerable from the sea end, and that is where I mean to attack. We'll force that door and explore from this end later. Commander Minden, you may stay here with Mr. Harron, if you like, or you may come with Carnes and me. We are going on board the *Minneconsin*."

THE Mitchell Field plane roared to a take-off and bore south along the coast. Half an hour of flying brought them in view of the battleship steaming at full speed up the coast. Dr. Bird radioed instructions to the ship, and an hour later a launch picked them up from the beach and took them out. As soon as they were on board they resumed their progress, and in two hours the peak that Dr. Bird had marked as a landmark was opposite.

"Steam in as close to the shore as you can safely," he said, "and then lower us. Once we are down, you will be guided by our telephoned instructions. Come on, Carnes, let's go."

The detective followed him into the sphere as the *Minneconsin* edged up toward the shore. The huge ball was lifted from the deck and lowered gently into two hundred fathoms of water. It was pitch dark at that depth, and Dr. Bird switched on one floodlight and studied the cliff which rose a hundred yards from them.

"We have missed the place, Carnes," he said. "We'll have them pull us up a few hundred feet and then steam along the coast."

He turned to the telephone and the sphere rose while the battleship steamed slowly ahead, the vitrilene ball following in her wake. For a quarter of a mile they continued on their way, and then Dr. Bird halted the ship.

"What depth are we?" he asked. "Eighty fathoms? All right, lower us, please."

THE ball sank until it rested on the sea bottom, and Dr. Bird turned on two additional floodlights and studied the surroundings. The bed of the ocean was literally covered with lobster and crab shell, with the bones of fish scattered here and there among them. A few bones of land animals were mixed with the debri sand Carnes gave a gasp as Dr. Bird pointed out to him a diving helmet.

"We are on the right track," said the scientist grimly. He stepped to the telephone and ordered the sphere raised to one hundred fathoms. The ship moved forward along the coast until Dr. Bird again stepped to the telephone and halted it. Before them yawned the entrance to the underground tunnel. It was about two hundred feet high and three hundred across, and their most powerful beams would not penetrate to the end of it. A pile of debris could be seen on the

floor of the tunnel and Carnes fancied that he could see another diving helmet among the litter. Dr. Bird pointed toward the side of the cavern.

"See those floodlights fastened to the cliff so that their beams will sweep across the mouth of the tunnel when they are lighted?" he said. "Apparently the cave is used as a prison and the light beams are the bars. The creature is not at home just now or the bars would be up. My God! Look at that, Carnes!"

Carnes stared and echoed the Doctor's cry of surprise. Clinging to a shelf of rock which extended out from the wall of the cavern and half hidden among the seaweed was a huge marine creature. It looked like a huge black slug with rudimentary eyes and mouth. The thing was fifty feet in length and fully fifteen feet in diameter. It hung there, moving sluggishly as though breathing, and rudimentary tentacles projecting from one end moved in the water.

"What is it, Doctor?" asked Carnes in a voice of awe.

"It is a typical trochosphere of the giant octopus, the devil fish of Indian Ocean legend, multiplied a thousand times," he replied. "When the octopus lays its eggs, they hatch out into the larval form. The free swimming larva is known as a trochosphere, and I am positive that that is what we see; but look at the size of the thing! Man alive, if that ever developed, I can't conceive of its dimensions!"

"I HAVE seen pictures of a huge octopus pulling down a ship," said Carnes, "but I always fancied they were imaginary."

"They are. This monstrosity before us is no product of nature. A dozen of them would depopulate the seas in a year. It is a hideous parody of nature conceived in the brain of a madman and produced by some glandular disturbance. Saranoff spent years in glandular experimentation, and no doubt he has managed to stimulate the thyroid of a normal octopus and produce a giant. I fancy that the immediate parent of the thing before us was of normal size, and so, probably, are its brothers and sisters. The phenomenon of giantism of this nature occurs in alternate generations and then only in rare instances. Its grandparent may not be far away, however. I wish it was safe to use a submarine to explore that cavern."

"Why isn't it?"

"Any creature powerful enough to pull the *Arethusa* under water would crush a frail submarine without effort. Anyway, a Navy sub isn't built for under-water exploration like this ball is. The window space is quite limited and they aren't equipped with powerful floodlights. I would like to be able to reach that thing and destroy it, but it can wait until later. The best thing we can do is to put out our lights and wait."

His hand sought the light switch, and the globe became dark. Only a tiny glimmer of light came down to them from the surface, a hundred fathoms above. In the darkness they stared into the depths of the sea.

FOR an hour they waited and then Dr. Bird grasped Carnes by the shoulder and pointed. Far in the distance could be seen a tiny point of light. It wavered and winked and at times disappeared, but it was gradually approaching them. Dr. Bird stepped to the telephone and the *Minneconsin* moved a hundred yards further from the shore. The light disappeared again as though hidden by some opaque body. Their eyes had become accustomed to the dim light and they could dimly see a long snake-like body approach the globe and then suddenly withdraw.

The light appeared again only a few hundred yards away. The water swirled and the sphere swayed drunkenly as some gigantic body moved past it with express train speed and entered the mouth of the cavern. The light turned toward them and they could see

the dim outlines of a small submarine on which it was mounted. Another rush of water came as the object which had entered the cave started to leave it, and the light swung around. It bore on a huge black body, and was reflected with a red glow from huge eyes, and the creature backed again into the cave. Back and forth across the mouth of the cavern the light played, and the watchers caught a glimpse of a huge parrot beak which could have engulfed a freight car. From the cavern projected twisting tentacles of gargantuan dimensions, and red eyes, thirty feet in diameter, glared balefully at them. For several minutes the light of the submarine played across the mouth of the cave, and then the floodlights on the cliff sprang into full glow and bathed the ball and the mouth of the tunnel in a flood of light.

Before their horrified gaze was an octopus of a size to make them disbelieve their eyes. The submarine had moved up to within a few feet of them, and the light from it played full on the ball. The submarine maneuvered in the vicinity, keeping the ball full in the beam of its light, and then drew back. As it did so, the floodlights on the cliff died out and the beam of the submarine's light was directed away from them. Dr. Bird jumped to the telephone.

"Head straight out to sea and full speed ahead!" he shouted. "Don't try to pull us in; tow us!"

THE ball swayed as the *Minneconsin's* mighty engines responded to his orders and the cliff wall disappeared.

"As long as they know we're here, we might as well announce our presence in good style," said the doctor grimly as he closed a switch and threw all of the sphere's huge lights into action. He had turned on the lights just in time, for even as he did so a mighty tentacle shot out of the darkness and wrapped itself around the ball. For a moment it clung there and then was withdrawn.

"The thing can't stand light," remarked the doctor as he threw off the switch. "That sub was herding it like a cow by the use of a light beam. As long as we are lighted up we are safe from attack."

"Then for God's sake turn on the lights!" cried Carnes.

"I want it to attack us," replied the doctor calmly. "We have no offensive weapons and only by meeting an attack can we harm the thing."

As he spoke there came a soft whisper of sound from the vitrilene walls and they were thrown from their feet by a sudden jerk. Dr. Bird stumbled to the switch and closed it, and the ball was flooded with light. Two arms were now on them but they were slowly withdrawn as the lights glared forth. The huge outlines of the beast could be seen as it followed them toward the surface. Its great eyes glared at them hungrily. The submarine was visible only as a speck of light in the distance.

THE *Minneconsin's* speed was picking up under the urge of her huge steam turbines, and the ball was nearing the surface. The sea was light enough now that they could see for quite a distance. The telephone bell jangled and Dr. Bird picked the receiver from its hook.

"Hello," he said. "What's that? You can? By all means, fire. Yes, indeed, we're well out of danger; we must be thirty or forty feet down. Watch the fun now," he went on to Carnes as he replaced the receiver. "The beast is showing above the surface and they're going to shell it."

They watched the surface and suddenly there came a flash of light followed by a dull boom of sound. The huge octopus suddenly sank below them, thrashing its arms about wildly.

"A hit!" shouted Dr. Bird into the telephone. "Get it again if it shows up. I want it to get good and mad."

He turned off the lights in the ball and the octopus attacked again. The shell had taught it caution and it kept

well down, but three huge arms came up from the depths of the sea and wrapped themselves about the ball. The forward motion stopped for a moment, and then came a jerk that threw them down. The ball started to sink.

"Our cable has parted!" cried the doctor. "Turn on the lights!"

CARNES closed the switch. The ball was so covered with the huge tentacles that they could see nothing, but the light had its usual effect and they were released. The ball sank toward the bottom and they could see the huge cephalopod lying below watching them. Blood was flowing from a wound near one of its eyes where the *Minneconsin's* shell had found its mark.

Toward the huge monster they sank until they lay on the bottom of the ocean and a few yards from it. In an instant the sea became opaque and they could see nothing.

"He has shot his ink!" cried to doctor. "Here comes the real attack. Strap yourself to the wall where you can reach one of the motor switches."

Through the darkness huge arms came out and wrapped themselves around the ball. The heavy vitrilene groaned under the enormous pressure which was applied, but it held. The ink was clearing slightly and they could see that the sphere was covered by the arms. The mass moved and the huge maw opened before them. The pipes projecting from the sides of the ball were buried in the creature's flesh.

"Good Lord, he's going to swallow us!" gasped the doctor. "Quick, Carnes, the motor switch."

He closed one of them as he spoke, and the powerful little electric motors began to hum, forcing forward the piston attached to the tank connected to the hollow rods. Steadily the little motors hummed, and the tank emptied through the rods into the body of the giant cephalopod.

"I hope the stuff works fast," groaned the doctor as they approached closer to the giant maw. "I never tried giving an octopus a hypodermic injection of prussic acid before, but it ought to do the business. There's enough acid there to kill half New York City."

CARNES blanched as the ball approached the mouth. One by one the arms unwound until only one was holding them and the jaws opened wider. They were almost in them when the motion stopped. They could feel a shudder run through the arm which held them. For a moment the arm alternately expanded and contracted, almost releasing them only to clutch them again. Another arm came from the depths and whipped about the ball, and again the vitrilene groaned at the pressure which was applied. The arms were suddenly withdrawn and the ball started to sink.

"Drop the lead, Carnes!" cried the doctor. With the aid of the detective he operated the electric catches which held the huge mass of lead to the bottom, and the sphere shot up through the water like a rocket. It leaped clear of the water and fell back with a splash. A half mile away the *Minneconsin* was swinging in a wide circle to head back toward them. They turned their gaze toward the shore.

As they looked a giant arm shot a hundred yards up into the air, twisting and writhing frantically. It disappeared, and another, and then half a dozen flashed into the air. The arms dipped below the surface. A huge black body reared its bulk free from the water for a moment, and the sea boiled as though in a violent storm. The body sank and again the arms were thrown up, twisting and turning like a half dozen huge snakes. The whole creature sank below the waves and the ball tossed back and forth, often buried under tons of water and once tossed thirty feet into the air by the huge waves.

A MOMENTARY lull came in the waves. Carnes gave a cry of astonishment and pointed toward the

shore. With an effort, Dr. Bird twisted himself in his lashing and looked in that direction. The huge body had again come to the surface, and three of the arms were towering into the air. Grasped in them was a long, black, cigar-shaped object. As they watched the object was torn into two parts and the fragments crushed by the enormous power of the octopus. Again the arms writhed in torment, and then they stiffened out. For a moment they towered in the air and then slowly sank below the surface of the sea.

"The cyanide has worked," cried the doctor, "and in its last agonies the creature has turned on its creator and destroyed him. It is a shame, for Saranoff was a brilliant although perverted genius, and besides, I would have liked to have learned his method. However, I may find something when we open the land end and raid the cave; and really, he was too brilliant a man to hang for murder. Once we open the cave and I get any data that is there, my connection with the case will end. Trailing down the gold and recovering it is a routine matter for Bolton, and one in which he won't need my help."

"What about that creature we saw in the cave, Doctor? Won't it hatch into another terror of the sea like the thing that destroyed the ship?"

"The trochosphere? No, I'm not worried there. It won't try to leave the cave for some days yet, and by that time we'll have the land end opened and the floodlights turned on. They will keep it there and it will starve to death. We could send down a sub to feed it a torpedo, but there's no need. Nature will dispose of it. Meanwhile, I hope the *Minneconsin* rigs up a jury tackle pretty soon and takes us on board. I'm getting seasick."

IN THE NEXT ISSUE

THE FIFTH-DIMENSION CATAPULT

A Novelette of an Extraordinary Interdimensional Rescue

By Murray Leinster

THE GATE TO XORAN

A Thrilling Story of a Metal Man's Visit to Earth

By Hal K. Wells

THE EYE OF ALLAH

A Story of the Tracking Down of a Mysterious Scientific Killer

By C. D. Willard

THE PIRATE PLANET

Part Three of the Outstanding Current Novel

By Charles W. Diffin

——AND OTHERS!

There came a stabbing pencil of light from over Karl's shoulder.

Gray Denim

By Harl Vincent

BENEATH the huge central arch in Cooper Square a meeting was in progress—a gathering of the gray-clad workers of the lower levels of New York. Less than two hundred of their number were in evidence, and these huddled in dejected groups around the pedestal from which a fiery-tongued orator was addressing them. Lounging negligently at the edge of the small crowd were a dozen of the red police.

"I tell you, comrades," the speaker was shouting, "the time has come when we must revolt. We must battle to the death with the wearers of the purple. Why work out our lives down here so they can live in the lap of luxury over our

The blood of the Van Dorn's ran in Karl's veins. He rode the skies like an avenging god.

heads? Why labor day after day at the oxygen generators to give them the fresh air they breathe?"

The speaker paused uncertainly as a chorus of raucous laughter came to his ears. He glared belligerently at a group of newcomers who stood aloof from his own gathering. Seven or eight of them there were, and they wore the gray with obvious discomfort. Slummers! Well, they'd hear something they could carry back with them when they returned to their homes!

"Why," he continued in rising tones, "do we sit at the controls of the pneumatic tubes which carry thousands of our fellows to tasks equally irksome, while they of the purple ride their air yachts to the pleasure cities of the sky lanes? Never in the history of mankind have the poor been poorer and the rich richer!"

"Yah!" shouted a disrespectful voice from among the newcomers. "You're full o' bunk! Nothing but bunk!"

An ominous murmur swelled from the crowd and the red police roused from their lethargy. The mounting scream of a siren echoed in the vaulted recesses above and re-echoed from the surrounding columns — the call for reserves.

ALL was confusion in the Square. The little group of newcomers immediately became the center of a mêlée of dangerous proportions. Some of the more timid of the wearers of the gray struggled to get out of the crowd and away. Others, not in sympathy with the speaker, rushed to the support of the besieged visitors. The police were, for the moment, overwhelmed.

The orator, mad with resentment and injured pride, hurled himself into the group. A knife flashed in his hand; rose and fell. A scream of agony shrilled piercingly above the din of the fighting.

Then came the reserves, and the wielder of the knife turned to escape. He broke away from the milling combatants and made speedily for the shadows that lay beyond the great pillars of the Square. But he never reached them, for one of the red guards raised his riot pistol and fired. There was a dull *plop*, and a rubbery something struck the fleeing man and wrapped powerful tentacles around his body, binding him hand and foot in their swift embrace. He fell crashing to the pavement.

A lieutenant of the red police was shouting his orders and the din in the Square was deafening. With their numbers greatly augmented, the guards were now in control of the situation and their maces struck left and right. Groans and curses came from the gray-clad workers, who now fought desperately to escape.

Then, with startling suddenness, the artificial sunlight of the cavernous Square was gone, leaving the battle to continue in utter darkness.

COOPER SQUARE, in the year 2108, was the one gathering place in New York City where the wearers of the gray denim were permitted to assemble and discuss their grievances publicly. Deep in the maze of lower-level ways seldom visited by wearers of the purple, the grottolike enclosure bore the name of a philanthropist of the late nineteenth century and still carried a musty air of certain of the traditions of that period.

In Astor Way, on the lowest level of all, there was a tiny book shop. Nestled between two of the great columns that provided foundation support for the eighty levels above, it was safely hidden from the gaze of curious passersby in the Square. Slumming parties from afar, their purple temporarily discarded for the gray, occasionally passed within a stone's throw of the little shop, never suspecting the existence of such a retreat amidst the dark shadows of the pillars. But to the initiated few amongst the wearers of the gray, and to certain of the red police, it was well known.

Rudolph Krassin, proprietor of the

establishment, was a bent and withered ancient. His jacket of gray denim hung loosely from his spare frame and his hollow cough bespoke a deep-seated ailment. Looking out from behind thick lenses set in his square-rimmed spectacles, the watery eyes seemed vacant; uncomprehending. But old Rudolph was a scholar—keen-witted—and a gentleman besides. To his many friends of the gray-clad multitude he was an anomaly; they could not understand his devotion to his well-thumbed volumes. But they listened to his words of wisdom and, more frequently than they could afford, parted with precious labor tickets in exchange for reading matter that was usually of the lighter variety.

WHEN the fighting started in the Square, Rudolph was watching and listening from a point of vantage in the shadows near his shop. This fellow Leontardo, who was the speaker, was an agitator of the worst sort. His arguments always were calculated to arouse the passions of his hearers; to inflame them against the wearers of the purple. He had nothing constructive to offer. Always he spoke of destruction; war; bloodshed. Rudolph marveled at the patience of the red police. Today, these newcomers, obviously a slumming party of youngsters bent on whatever mischief they could find, were interfering with the speaker. The old man chuckled at the first interruption. But at signs of real trouble he scurried into the shadows and vanished in the blackness of first-level passages known only to himself. He knew where to find the automatic sub-station of the Power Syndicate.

Returning to the darkness he had created in the Square, he was relieved to find that the sounds of the fighting had subsided. Apparently most of the wearers of the gray had escaped. He skirted the avenue of pillars along Astor Way, feeling his way from one to another as he progressed toward his little shop. Peering into the blackness of the square he saw the feeble beams of several flash-lamps in the hands of the police. They were searching for survivors of the fracas, maces and riot pistols held ready for use. A sobbing gasp from close by set his pulses throbbing. He crept stealthily in the direction from which the sound had come.

"Steady now," came a whispered voice. "My uncle's shop is close by. He'll take you in. Here—let me lift you."

THERE was a shuffling on the opposite side of the pillar at which Rudolph had halted; another grunt of pain.

"Karl!" hissed the old man. It was his nephew.

"Uncle Rudolph?" came the guarded response.

"Yes. Can I help you."

"Quick—yes—he's fainted."

The old man was around the huge base of the column in an instant. He groped in the darkness and his hands encountered human bodies.

"Who is it?" he breathed.

"One of the hecklers, Uncle. A young lad; and of the purple I think. He's been knifed."

Together they dragged the inert form into the shelter of the long line of pillars. There was a trampling of many men in the square. That would be a second detachment of reserves. A ray of light filtered through and dancing shadows of the giant columns made grotesque outlines against the walls of the Way. A portable searchlight had been brought to the scene. They must hurry.

Impeded by the dead weight of their burden, they made sorry progress and several times found it necessary to halt in the shadow of a pillar while the red police passed by in their search of the Square. It was with a sigh of relief that Rudolph opened the door of his shop and with still greater satisfaction closed and bolted it securely. His nephew shouldered the limp form of the unconscious youth and carried it

to his own bed in one of the rear rooms.

"Ugh!" exclaimed old Rudolph as he ripped open the young man's shirt, "it's a nasty cut. Warm water, Karl."

The gaping wound was washed and bound tightly. Rudolph's experienced fingers told him the knife had not reached a vital spot. The youth would recover.

"But Karl," he objected, "he wears the purple. Under the gray. See! It'll get us in trouble if we keep him."

He was stripping the young man of his clothing to prepare him for bed. Suddenly there was revealed on the white skin a triangular mark. Bright scarlet it was and just over the right hip. He made a hasty attempt to hide it from the watching eyes of Karl.

"Uncle!" snapped his nephew, "—the mark you call cursed! He has it, too!"

THE tall young man in gray was on his knees, tearing the hands of the old man away. He saw the mark clearly now. There was no further use of attempting to conceal it. Rudolph rose and faced his angered nephew, his watery eyes inscrutable.

"You told me, Rudolph, that it was a brand that cursed me. I have seen it on him, too. You have lied to me."

The old man's eyes wavered. He trembled violently.

"Why did you lie?" demanded Karl, "Am I not your nephew? Am I not really cursed as you've maintained? Tell me—tell me!"

He had the old man by the shoulders, shaking him cruelly.

"Karl—Karl," begged the helpless ancient, "it was for your good. I swear it. You were born to the purple. That's what that mark means—not that you're degraded to the gray, as I said. But there's a reason. Let me explain."

"Bah! A reason! You've kept me in this misery and squalor for a reason! Who's my father?"

He flung Rudolph to the floor, where the old man crouched in apprehensive misery.

"Please Karl—don't! I can explain. Just give me time. It's a long story."

"Time! Time! For twenty-odd years you've lied to me; cheated me. My birthright—where is it?"

He menaced his supposed uncle; was about to strike him. Then suddenly he was ashamed. He turned on his heel.

"I'm leaving," he said shortly.

"Karl—my boy," begged Rudolph Krassin, struggling to his feet. "You can't! That lad in there—he—"

But Karl was too angry to reason.

"To hell with him!" he raged, "and to hell with you! I'm through!"

He stamped from the room and out into the eery shadows of the Way. Karl was done with his old life. He'd go to the upper levels and claim his rights. Some day, too, he'd punish the man who'd stolen them away. God! Born to the purple! To think he'd missed it all! Probably was kidnaped by the old rascal he'd been calling uncle. But he'd find out. Rudolph didn't have to explain. Fingerprint records would clear his name; establish his rightful station in life. He dived into a passage that would lead him to one of the express lifts. He'd soon be overhead.

A SERGEANT of the red police looked up startled from his desk as a tall youth in the gray denim of forty levels below appeared before him.

"Well?" he growled. The stalwart young worker had stared belligerently and insolently, he thought.

"I want to check my fingerprint record, Sergeant."

"Hm. Pretty cocky, aren't you? The records for such as you are down below, where you belong."

"Not mine, I think."

"So? And who the devil are you?"

"That's what I'm here to find out. I've got a triangle branded on my right hip."

"A what?"

"Triangle. Here—look!"

The amazing youngster had raised his jacket and was pulling at his shirt.

The sergeant stared at what was revealed, his eyes bulging as he looked.

"Lord!" he gasped, "a Van Dorn—in the gray!"

Quickly he turned to the radiovision and made rapid connection with several persons in turn—important ones, by the appearance of the features of each in the brilliant disc of the instrument.

Karl was confused by the sudden turn of things. The sergeant talked so rapidly he could not catch the sense of his words. And that name, Van Dorn, eluded him. He knew he had heard it before, in the little shop down there in Astor Way. But he could not place it. He wished fervently that he had paid more attention to the desires of old Rudolph; had studied more and read the books the old man had begged him to read. His new surroundings confused him, too, and he knew that he was the center of some great new excitement.

THEN they were in the room; two individuals, one in the red uniform of a captain of police, the other a pompous, whiskered man in purple. Others followed and it seemed to Karl that the room was filled with them, strangers all, and they stared at him and chattered incessantly. He experienced an overwhelming impulse to run, but mastered it and faced them boldly.

A square of plate glass was placed under his outstretched fingers. It was smeared with something sticky and he watched the whiskered man as he held it up to the light and studied the impressions. Then there was more confusion. Everyone talked at once and the pompous one in purple made use of the radiovision, holding the square of glass near its disc for observation by the person he had called. The identification number was repeated aloud, a string of figures and letters that were a meaningless jumble to Karl. The room became quiet while the police captain thumbed the pages of a huge book he had taken from among many similar ones that filled a rack behind the desk.

Karl's blood froze in his veins at the rumbling swish of a car speeding through the pneumatic tube beneath their feet. His nerves were on edge. Then the captain of police looked up from the book and there was a peculiar glint in his eyes as he spoke.

"Peter Van Dorn. Missing since 2085. Wanted by Continental Government. Ha!"

The words came to Karl's ears through a growing sensation of unreality. It seemed that the speaker was miles away and that his voice and features were those of a radiovision likeness. Wanted by the great power across the Atlantic! It was unthinkable. Why, he had been but an infant in 2085! What possible crime could he have committed? But the red police captain was speaking again, this time in a chill voice. And the room of the police, thick with the smoke of a dozen cigars, became suddenly stifling.

"Where have you been these twenty-three years, Peter Van Dorn?" asked the captain. "Who have you lived with, I mean?"

SOMETHING warned him to protect old Rudolph. And somehow he wished he had not treated the old fellow as he did when he left. His self-possession returned. A wave of hot resentment swept over him.

"That's my affair," he said defiantly.

The captain shrugged his shoulders. "Oh, well," he said, "you needn't answer—now. We'll find out when it's necessary. In the meanwhile we'll have to turn you over to the Continental Ambassador."

Two of the red police advanced toward him and the rest drew back.

"You mean I'm under arrest?" asked Karl incredulously.

"Certainly. Of course you're not to be harmed."

One of the guards had him by the arm and he saw the glint of handcuffs. They couldn't do this! If it had been

for rioting in the Square it would be different. But this! It meant he was a prisoner of a foreign government, for what reason he could not guess. He lost his head completely.

The captain cried out in amazement as one of his huskiest guards went sprawling under a well-planted punch. This youngster must be as crazy as was his father before him. But he was a whirlwind. Before he could be stopped he had tackled the other guard and with a mighty heave flung him halfway across the room where he fell with a thud that left him dazed and gasping. The pompous little man in the purple crawled under the desk as the sergeant leveled a slender tube at the young giant in gray.

Karl ducked instinctively at sight of the weapon, but the spiteful crackle of its mechanism was too quick for him. A faintly luminous ray struck him full in the breast and stopped him in his tracks. A thrill of intense cold chased up his spine and a thunderbolt crashed in his brain. The captain caught his stiffened body as he fell.

KARL—refusing to think of himself as Peter Van Dorn—came to his senses as from a troubled sleep. His head ached miserably and he turned it slowly to view his surroundings. Then, in a flash, he remembered. The paralyzing ray of the red police! They never used it in the lower levels; but overhead—why, the swine! He sat suddenly erect and glared into a pair of green eyes that regarded him curiously.

A quick glance showed him that he was in a small padded compartment like that of the pneumatic tube cars. At one end there was an amazing array of machinery with glittering levers and handwheels—a control board on which numberless tiny lights blinked and flickered in rapid succession. At these controls squatted the twisted figure of a dwarf. A second of the creatures sat at his side and stared with those horrible green eyes.

"Lord!" he muttered. "Am I still asleep?"

"No," smiled the dwarf, "you're awake, Peter Van Dorn." The misshapen creature did not seem unfriendly.

"Then where am I, and who are you?"

"You're in one of the Zar's rocket cars, speeding toward Dorn. We are but two of the Zar's servants—Moon men."

"Rocket car? Moon men?" Karl was aghast. He wanted to pinch himself. But a hollow roar to the rear told him he was in a rapidly moving vessel of some sort. Certainly, too, these dwarfs were not figments of his imagination.

"You've been kept completely ignorant?" asked the dwarf.

"It—it seems so." Karl was bewildered. "You mean we are out in the open—traveling in space—to the Moon perhaps?"

THE dwarf laughed. "No, I wish we were," he replied. "But we are about halfway to the capital of the Continental Empire, greatest of world powers. We'll be there in an hour."

"But I don't understand."

"Stupid. Didn't you ever hear of the rocket ships that cross the ocean like a projectile, mounting a thousand miles from the surface and making the trip in two hours?"

"No!" Karl was aghast. "Are we really in such a contraption?" he faltered.

"Say! Are you kidding me?" The dwarf was incredulous. "Do you mean to tell me you know so little of your world as that? Have you never read anything? The news broadcasts, the thought exchangers—don't you follow them at all?"

Karl shook his head in growing wonder. Truly Rudolph had kept him in ignorance. Or was it his own fault? He had refused to dig into the volumes old Krassin had begged him to read. The broadcasts and the thought machines—well, only those of the purple had access to those.

"Hey, Laro!" called the dwarf to his companion, "this mole is as dumb as can be. Doesn't know he's alive hardly. And a Van Dorn!"

The two laughed uproariously and Karl raged inwardly. Mole! So that's what they called wearers of the gray! He clenched his fists and rose unsteadily to his feet.

"Sorry," apologized his tormentor. "Mustn't get sore now. It seems so funny to us though. And listen, kid, you'll never have another chance to hear it all. So, if you'll sit down and calm yourself a bit I'll give you an earful."

MOLLIFIED, Karl listened. A marvelous tale it was, of a disgruntled scientist of the Eastern Hemisphere who had conquered that portion of the world with the aid of the inhabitants he had found on the outer side of the Moon; of the scientist who still ruled the East—Zar of the Continental Empire. A horrible war—in 2085, the year of his own birth—depopulated the countries of Asia, Europe and Africa and reduced them to subjection. There was no combatting the destructive rays and chemical warfare of the Moon men. The United Americas, still weakened from a civil war of their own, remained aloof and, for some strange reason, the Zar left them in peace, contenting himself with his conquest of practically all of the rest of the world. Now, it seemed, the two major powers were as separate as if on different planets, there being no traffic between them save by governmental sanction; and that was rarely given.

It grew uncomfortably warm in the compartment as the rocket car entered the lower atmosphere but Karl listened spellbound to the astounding revelations of the Moon man. There came a pause in the discourse of the dwarf as a number of relays clicked furiously on the control board and the vessel slackened its speed perceptibly.

"But," said Karl, thinking aloud rather than meaning to interrupt, "what has all this to do with me? Why does the government of this Zar want me?"

The dwarf bent close and eyed him cautiously. "Poor kid!" he whispered, "it doesn't seem right that you should suffer for something that happened when you were born; something you know nothing about. But the Zar knows best. You—"

There came a stabbing pencil of light from over Karl's shoulder and the green eyes of the dwarf went wide with horrified surprise. He clutched at his breast where the flame had contacted, then slowly collapsed in a pitiful, distorted heap. Karl recoiled from the odor of putrefaction that immediately filled the compartment. He whirled to face the new danger but saw nothing but the padded walls.

Then they were in darkness save for the blinking lights of the control board. He was thrown forward violently and the piercing screech of compressed air rushing past the vessel told him they had entered the receiving tube at their destination and were being retarded in speed for the landing. This much he had gathered from the explanations of the now silenced dwarf.

Laro, the other Moon man, remained mute at the controls. His companion evidently had talked too much.

THE vessel had stopped and a section of the padded rear wall of the compartment moved back to reveal a second chamber. There were three other occupants of the ship and Karl knew now at whose hands the talkative Moon man had met his death. One of the three—all wearers of the purple—still held the generator of the dazzling ray in his hands. He decided wisely that resistance was useless and followed meekly when he was led from the ship.

Endlessly they rode upward in a high-speed lift, dismounting finally at a pneumatic tube entrance. A special car whisked them roaring into the

blackness. Then they were shot forth into the open and Karl saw the light of the sun for the first time in many years. They were on the upper surface of a great city, Dorn, the capital of the Continental Empire.

The air was filled with darting ships of all sorts and sizes, most of them being pleasure craft of the wearers of the purple. To Karl it was the sudden realization of his dreams. He was one of them. He, too, should be wearing the purple. Then his heart sank as one of his guards prodded him into action. His dream already was shattered for they stood at the entrance to a great crystal pyramid that rose from the flat expanse of the roofs of Dorn. It was the palace of the Zar.

It seemed then that fairyland had opened its gates to the young man in gray denim. He immediately fell under its influence when they traversed a long lane between rows of brightly colored growing things which filled the air with sweet odors. Feathered creatures fluttered about and twittered and caroled in the sheer joy of being alive. It was sweeter music than he had ever believed possible, or even imagined as existing. Again he forgot the menace of the imperial edict which had brought him from the other side of the world.

THEN rudely, he was brought back to earth. He was in the presence of the mighty Zar and his three escorts were bowing themselves from the huge room in which the wizened monarch sat enthroned. They had finished their duties.

A shriveled face; beady eyes; trembling hands with abnormally large knuckles; a cruel and determined mouth—these were the features that most impressed Karl as he stared wordlessly at this Zar of the Eastern Hemisphere. The magnificence of the royal robe was lost on the young wearer of the gray.

"Well, well, so this is Peter Van Dorn, my beloved nephew." The Zar was speaking and the chilly sarcasm in which the words were uttered belied the friendliness they otherwise might have implied.

"That's what I'm told," replied Karl, "though I didn't know I'm supposed to be the nephew of so great a figure as yourself."

Not bad that, for an humble wearer of the gray.

"Oh, yes, yes, indeed. Why else should I have sent for you?"

"I have wondered why—and still wonder."

"Oh, you wonder, eh?" The Zar inspected him carefully and then broke into a cackle of horrible laughter. "A Van Dorn in gray denim!" he chortled. "A mole of the Americas! And to think that even the Zar has been unable to find him in all these years!"

"Stop!" bellowed Karl. "I'll not have your ridicule. Come to the point now and have it over with. Kill me if you will, but tell me the story!" He had seen the slender tube in the Zar's hand.

AN expression of surprise, almost of admiration, flickered in the beady eyes of the Zar and was gone. He spoke coldly.

"Very well, I shall explain. You, Peter, are actually my nephew. Your father, Derek Van Dorn, was my brother; he a king of Belravia and I a poor but experienced scientist. He scorned me and he paid, for I learned of the ancient race of the other side of the Moon, the side we can not see from the earth. I went to them and enlisted their aid in warring upon my brother. When we returned to carry on this war I learned that I had a son. So, too, did Derek. But my son was born in obscurity and Derek's son—you, Peter—in the lap of luxury. The war was short and, to me, sweet. Belravia was first to fall, and I had your father removed from this life by the vibrating death."

"You monster!" cried Karl. But the slender rod menaced him.

"A moment, my hot-headed nephew. I vowed I'd have your life, Peter, but your father had a few friends and one of these spirited you away. So temporarily you escaped. But now I have you where I can keep that vow. You, too, shall die. By the vibration. But first—ha! ha!—I'll give you a taste of the purple. Just so the going will be harder."

Karl kept his temper as best he could. He thought, conscience-stricken, of old Rudolph, that good friend of his father. Then he thought of that youth he had taken from the Square.

"Your son?" he asked gently. "Has he the triangular brand?"

The Zar was taken aback. "He has, yes. Why?" he asked.

"I have seen him in the Americas. He now lies wounded and in peril of his life. What do you think of that?"

Karl was triumphant as the Zar paled.

"You lie, Peter Van Dorn!"

BUT the beady eyes saw that the young man was truthful. Sudden fury assailed the monarch of the East. A bell pealed its mellow summons and three Moon men entered the Presence.

"Quick, Taru—the radiovision! Our ambassador in the Americas!" The Zar was on his feet, his hard features terrible in fear and anger. "By God!" he vowed, "I'll lay waste the Americas if harm has come to my son. And you"—turning to Karl—"I'll reserve for you an even more terrible fate than the vibrating death!"

The radiovision was wheeled in and in operation. A frightened face appeared in its disc: the Zar's ambassador across the sea.

"Moreau—my son!" snapped the Zar. "Where is he?"

"Majesty! Have mercy!" gasped Moreau. "Paul has eluded us. He was skylarking—in the lower levels of New York. But our secret agents are combing the passages. We'll have him in twenty-four hours. I promise!"

The rage of the Zar was terrible to see. Karl expected momentarily that the white flame would lay him low, for the anger of the mad ruler was directed first at Moreau, then at himself. But a quick, evil calm succeeded the storm.

"You, Peter," he stated, in tones suddenly silky, "shall have that twenty-four hours—no more. If Moreau has not produced my son in that time you shall be dismembered slowly. A finger; an ear; your tongue; a hand—until you reveal the whereabouts of the heir to my throne!"

"Never! You scum!" Karl was on the dais in a single bound. He had the Zar by the throat, his fingers twisting in the flabby flesh. Might as well have it over at once. "Fratricide—murderer of my father, I'll take you with me!"

BUT it was not to be. The throne room was filled with retainers of the mad emperor. Strong hands tore him away and he was borne, struggling and fighting, to the floor. A sharp pain in his forearm. A deadening of the muscles. He was powerless, save for the painful ability to crawl to his knees, swaying drunkenly. A delicious languor overcame him. Nothing mattered now. He saw that a tall man in the purple had withdrawn the needle of the hypodermic and was replacing the instrument in its case. Ever so slowly, it seemed.

The Zar was laughing. That horrible cackle. But Karl didn't care. They'd have their sport with him. Let 'em! Then it'd be over. Lord! If only he had been a little quicker. He'd have torn the old Zar's windpipe from its place!

"My word," laughed the Zar. "The sacred word of a Van Dorn. I gave it. He'll wear the purple for a day. Take him from my sight!"

Karl was walking, quite willingly now. The effects of the drug were altering. His muscular strength returned but his mental state underwent a complete change. Always he'd wanted a taste of the purple. For years he'd listened to the orators of the Square,

to the conflicting statements of old Krassin. But now he'd see. He'd know the joys of the upper levels; the pleasure cities, perhaps. For one day. But what did it matter? He found himself laughing and joking with his companion, a heavy-set wearer of the purple. They were in a luxurious apartment. Servants! Moon men all of them, but so efficient. They stripped him of his gray denim; discarded it contemptuously. Karl kicked the heap into a corner and laughed delightedly. His bath was waiting.

MUCH can happen in a day. Clothed in the purple, Karl—Peter Van Dorn, he was, now—expanded. Turgid emotions surged through his new being. He was a new man. In his rightful place. He was delighted with the companionship of his new friend of the purple, Leon Lemaire. An euphonious name! A fine fellow! Fool that the Zar must be, to leave him in the care of so amiable a man. Why, Leon couldn't hold him! None of them could. He'd escape them all—if he wished. Twenty-four hours, indeed!

They were in the midst of a gay company. Wine flowed freely, and Leon had attached to their party a pair of beautiful damsels, young, and easy to know. There was music and dancing. Lights of marvelous color played over the assemblage in the huge hall, swaying their senses at the will of some expert manipulator. Peter was a different person now. He was exhilarated to the point of intoxication, but not by the wine. Somehow he couldn't bear the taste of the amber fluid the others were imbibing with such gusto. The effects of the drug had left a coppery taste in his mouth. But no matter! Rhoda, his lovely companion at the table leaned close. Her breath was hot at his throat. He swept her into his arms. Leon and the other girl laughed approvingly.

There were many such places in the upper levels of Dorn and they traveled from one to another. Now their party was larger, it having been augmented by the appearance of other of Leon's friends. Fine companions, these men of the purple, and the women were incomparable. Especially Rhoda. They understood one another perfectly now. It was all as he had pictured it.

Someone proposed that they visit the intermediate levels. It would be such a lark to watch the mechanicals. They made the drop in a lift. A laughing, riotous party. And Peter was one of them! He felt that he had known them for years. Rhoda clung to his arm, and the languorous glances from under her long lashes set the blood racing madly in his veins.

IN the levels of the mechanicals they romped boisterously. To them the strange robots—creatures of steel and glass and copper—were objects of ridicule. Poor, senseless mechanisms that performed the tasks that made the wearers of the purple independent of labor. Here they saw the preparation of their synthetic food, untouched by human hands. In one chamber a group of mechanicals, soulless and brainless, engaged in the delicate chemical compounding of raw materials that went into the making of their clothing. Here was a nursery, where tiny tots born to the purple were reared to adolescence by unfeeling but efficient mechanical nurses. The mothers of the purple could not be bothered with their offspring until they had reached the age of reason. The whirring machinery of a huge power plant provided much amusement for the feminine members of the party. It was all so massive; throbbing with energy. But dirty! Ugh! Lucky the attendants could be mechanicals.

"We have visited the lower levels," whispered Rhoda in his ear, "but not often. It isn't pleasant. Ignorant fools in the gray denim—too many of them. I don't know why we permit their existence. Fools who will not learn. Education made us as we are,

and they won't take it. Sullen looks and evil leers are all that they have for us. Hope nobody suggests going down there now."

"Me, too," said Peter. He had forgotten that once he was Karl Krassin, a wearer of the despised gray.

Someone in the party was becoming restless. They must move on.

"Where to?" asked Peter.

"Sans Dolor, sweet boy. A pleasure city within a hundred kilometers of Dorn. You'll love it, Peter."

A pleasure city! Fondest dream of the wearers of the gray! In the dim past, when he was Karl, he had dreamed it often. Now he was to visit one!

THEY were atop the city now and the crystal palace of the Zar shimmered in the sunlight off there across the flat upper surface of Dorn. But it seemed so far away that Peter did not give it a second thought. He was living in the present.

A swift aero took them into the skies and they roared out above the wilderness that was everywhere between the great cities of earth. Funny nobody thought of leaving the cities and exploring the jungles of the outside. But, of course, it wasn't necessary. They had everything they needed within the cities. All of their wants were supplied by the mecanicals and by the few toilers in the gray who still persisted in ignorance and in some perverse ideas that they must work in order to live. Besides, the jungle was dangerous.

Sans Dolor loomed into view, a great island floating in the air a thousand meters above the tossing waters of the ocean. Peter gave not a thought to the forces that kept it suspended. Dimly he recalled certain words of old Rudolph, words regarding the artificial emanations that had been discovered as capable of counteracting the force of gravity. But his mind was intent on the pleasures to come.

They were over the city. Carefully tended foliage lined its streets and a smooth lagoon glistened in its center. Its towers and spires were decorated with gay colors. The streets were filled with wearers of the purple and the nude bodies of bathers in the lagoon gleamed white in the strong sunlight.

He sensed anew the nearness of Rhoda. Her soft warm hand nestled in his and she responded instantly to his sudden embrace.

There came a shock and the party was stilled in dismay. The aero careened violently and the pilot struggled with controls that were dead. Sans Dolor dropped rapidly away beneath them. They were shooting skyward, drawn by some inexplicable and invisible energy from above.

RHODA screamed and held him close, trembling violently. All of the women screamed and the men cursed. Leon arose to his feet and stared at Peter. The friendliness was gone from his features and he spat forth an accusation. A glistening mechanism appeared in his hand as if by magic. A ray generator! He had been appointed by the Zar to guard this upstart and, whatever happened, he'd not let him escape with his life. The girl shuddered at sight of the weapon and extricated herself from his arms. Her affection too had been a pose.

Peter's mind was clearing from the effects of the drug. He had not the slightest idea of what might have caused the quick change in the situation but he resolved he would die fighting, if die he must. Leon fumbled with the catch of the generator. It refused to operate. The force that was drawing them upward had paralyzed all mechanisms aboard the little aero. Flinging it from him in disgust he sprang for Peter.

Their minds befuddled, the rest of the men watched dully. The women huddled together in a corner, whimpering. They were a sorry lot after all, thought Karl. He was no longer Peter Van Dorn, and he thrilled to the joy of battle.

LEON LEMAIRE was no mean antagonist. His flailing arms were everywhere and a huge fist caught Karl on the side of his head and sent him reeling. But this only served to clear his mind further and to fill him with a cold rage. He bored in unmercifully and Lemaire soon was on the defensive. A blow to his midsection had him puffing and Karl hammered in rights and left to the now sinister face that rocked his opponent to his heels. But the minion of the Zar was crafty. He slid to the floor as if groggy, then with catlike agility, dove for Karl's knees, bringing him down with a crash.

The air whistled by them as the ship was drawn upward with ever-increasing speed. The other passengers cowered in fright as the two men rolled over and over on the floor, banging at each other indiscriminately. Both were hurt. Karl's lip was split, and bleeding profusely. One eye was closing. But now he was on top and he pummeled his opponent to a pulp. Long after he ceased resisting them, the blows continued until the features of Leon Lemaire were unrecognizable. The infuriated Karl did not see that one of the members of the party was creeping up on him from behind. Neither was he aware that the upward motion of the aero had ceased and that they now hung motionless in space. A terrific blow at the base of his skull sent him sprawling. Must have been struck by a rocket, one of those funny ships that crossed the ocean so quickly. A million lights danced before his aching eyeballs.

Lying prone across the inert body of his foe, dimly conscious and fingers clutching weakly, he knew that the cabin was filled with people. Alien voices bellowed commands. There was the screaming of women; the sound of blows; curses then all was silence and darkness.

IT was a far cry to the little book shop off Cooper Square, but Karl was calling for Rudolph when he next awoke to the realization that he was still in the land of the living. His head was bandaged and his tongue furry. A terrible hangover. Then he heard voices and they were discussing Peter Van Dorn. He opened one eye as an experiment. The other refused to open. But it might have been worse. At least he was alive; he could see well enough with the one good optic.

"Sh-h!" whispered one of the voices. "He's recovering!"

He looked solemnly into the eyes of an old man; a pair of wise and gentle eyes that reminded him somehow of Rudolph's.

"Quiet now, Peter," said the old man. "You'll be all right in a few minutes. Banged up a bit, you are, but nothing serious."

"Don't call me Peter," objected Karl. He loathed the sound of the name; loathed himself for his recent thoughts and actions. "I am Karl Krassin," he continued, "and as such will remain until I die."

There were others in the room and he saw glances of satisfaction pass between them. This was a strange situation. These men were not of the purple. Neither were they of the gray. Their garments shone with the whiteness of pure silver. And that's what they were; of finely woven metallic cloth. Was he in another world?

"Very well, Karl." The kind old man was speaking once more. "I merely want you to know that you are among friends—your father's friends."

SURPRISED into complete wakefulness, Karl struggled to a seated position and surveyed the group that faced him. They were a fine looking lot, mostly older men, but there was a refreshing wholesomeness about them.

"My father?" he faltered. "He's not alive."

"No, my poor boy. Derek Van Dorn left this life at the hands of your uncle, Zar Boris. But we, his friends, are here to avenge him and to restore to you his throne."

"But—but—I still do not understand."

"Of course not, because we've kept ourselves hidden from the world for more than twenty-two years, waiting for this very moment. There are forty-one of us, including Rudolph, my brother. We have lived in the jungle since Boris conquered the Eastern Hemisphere. But amongst our numbers were several scientists, two greater than was Boris, even in his heyday. They have done wonderful things and we are now prepared to take back what was taken from Derek—and more. His life we can not restore—Heaven rest him—but his kingdom we can. And to his son it shall be returned.

"You were given into Rudolph's care when little more than a babe in arms and he has cared for you well. We've watched, you know, in the detectoscopes—long range radiovision mechanisms that can penetrate solid walls, the earth itself, to bring to us the images and voices of persons who may be on the other side of the world. We've followed your every move, my boy, and the first time we feared for you was yesterday when the drug of the Zar's physician stole away your sense of right and wrong. But we were in time to save you, and now we are ready to kneel at your feet and proclaim you our king. First there is the Zar to be dealt with and then we shall set up the new regime. Are you with us?"

KARL gazed at the speaker in wonder. He a king? Always to live amongst the wearers of the purple? To be responsible for the welfare of half the world? It was unthinkable! But Zar Boris, the murderer of his own father—he must be punished, and at the hands of the son!

"I'll do it," he said simply. "That is, I'll do whatever you have planned in the way of exterminating the Zar. Then we'll talk of the new empire. But how is the Zar to be overcome? I thought he was invincible, with his Moon men and terrible weapons."

"Ah! That, my boy, is where our scientists have triumphed. True, his rays were terrible. They could not be combatted when he first returned. The strange chemicals and gases of the Moon men defied analysis or duplication. His citadel atop the city of Dorn is proof against them all; proof against explosives and rays of all kinds known to him. The disintegration and decomposition rays have no effect on the crystal of its walls. It is hermetically sealed from the outer air so can not be gassed. The vibration impulses have no effect upon its reinforced structure. But there is a ray, a powerful destructive agent, against which it is not proof. And our scientists have developed this agency. You shall have the privilege of pressing the release of the energy that destroys the arch-fiend in his lair. His dominance over, the empire will fall. We shall take it—for you."

A strange exaltation shone from the faces of those in the room, and Karl found that it was contagious. His bosom swelled and he itched to handle the controls of this wonderful ray.

"This ray," continued the brother of old Rudolph, "carries the longest vibrations ever measured, the vibrations of infra-red, the heat-ray. We have succeeded in concentrating a terrific amount of power in its production, and with it are able to produce temperatures in excess of that of the interior of the earth, where all substances are molten or gaseous. The Zar's crystal palace cannot withstand it for a second. He cannot escape!"

"How'll you know he's there at the time?" Karl was greatly excited, but he was curious too.

"Come with me, my boy. I'll show you." The old man led him from the room and the others followed respectfully.

THEY stopped at a circular port and Karl saw that they were high above the earth in a vessel that hovered motionless, quivering with

what seemed like human eagerness to be off.

"This vessel?" he asked.

"It's a huge sphere; the base of our operations. To it we drew the aero on which you were fighting. A magnetic force discovered by our scientists and differing only slightly from that used in counteracting gravity. We let the rest of them go; foolishly I think. But it's done now and we have no fear. From this larger vessel we shall send forth smaller ones, armed with the heat-ray. The flagship of the fleet is to be yours and you'll lead the attack on Dorn. Here—I'll show you the Zar."

They had reached the room of the detectoscopes—a mass of mechanisms that reminded Karl of nothing so much as the vitals of the intermediate levels which he had visited with Leon—and Rhoda. He knew that he flushed when he thought of her. What a fool he had been!

A disc glowed as one of the silver-robed strangers manipulated the controls. The upper surface of Dorn swung into view. Rapidly the image drew nearer and they were looking at the crystal pyramid that was the Zar's palace. Down, down to its very tip they passed. Karl recoiled from the image as it seemed they were falling to its glistening sides. The sensation passed. They were through, penetrating solid crystal, masonry, steel and duralumin girders. Room after room was opened to their view. It was magic—the magic of the upper levels.

NOW they were in the throne room. A group of purple-clad men and women stood before the dais. Leon, Rhoda—all of his wild companions were there, facing the dais. The Zar was raging and the words of his speech came raucously to their ears through the sound-producing mechanism.

"You've failed miserably, all of you," he screamed. "He's gotten away and you know the penalty. Taru—the vibrating ray!"

The Moon man already was fussing with a gleaming machine, a machine with bristling appendages having metallic spheres on their ends, a machine in which dozens of vacuum tubes glowed suddenly.

Rhoda screamed. It was a familiar sound to Karl. He noted with satisfaction that Leon could hardly stand on his feet and that his face was covered with plasters. Then, startled, he saw that Leon was shivering as with the ague. His outline on the screen grew dim and indistinct as the rate of vibration increased. Then the body bloated and became misty. He could see throught it. The vibrating death! His father had gone the same way!

Karl groaned at the thought. The whine of the distant machine rose in pitch until it passed the limit of audibility. Tiny pin-points of incandescence glowed here and there from the Zar's victims as periods of vibration were reached that coincided with the natural periods of certain of the molecules of their structure. They were no longer recognizable as human beings. Shimmering auras surrounded them. Suddenly they were torches of cold fire, weaving, oscillating with inconceivable rapidity. Then they were gone; vanished utterly.

The Zar laughed — that horrible cackle again.

"Great God!" exclaimed Karl, "let's go! The fiend must not live a moment longer than necessary. Are you ready?"

Rudolph's brother smiled. "We're ready Karl," he said.

THE great vessel hummed with activity. The five torpedo-shaped aeros of the battle fleet were ready to take off from the cavities in the hull. In the flagship Karl was stationed at the control of the heat-ray. His instructions in its operation had been simple. A telescopic sight with cross-hairs for the centering of the object to be attacked; a small lever. That was all. He burned with impatience.

Then they were dropping; falling clear of the mother ship. The pilot pressed a button and the electronic motors started. A burst of roaring energy streamed from the tapered stern of their vessel and the earth lurched violently to meet them. Down, down they dived until the rocking surface of Dorn was just beneath them. Then they flattened out and circled the vast upper surface. From the corner of his eye Karl saw that the other four vessels of his fleet were just behind. There was a flurry among the wasplike clouds of pleasure craft over the city. They scurried for cover. Something was amiss!

"Hurry!" shouted Karl. "The warning is out! There is no time to lose!"

He pressed his face to the eye-piece of his sight, his finger on the release lever of the ray. The crystal pyramid crossed his view and was gone. Again it crossed, more slowly this time. And now his sight was dead on it, the gleaming wall rushing toward him. Pressure on the tiny button. They'd crash into the palace in another second! But no, a brilliant flash obscured his vision, a blinding light that made the sun seem dark by comparison. They roared on and upward. He took his eye from the telescope and stared ahead, down. The city was dropping away, and, where the crystal palace had stood, there was a spreading blob of molten material from which searing vapors were drifting. The roofs of the city were sagging all around and great streams of the sparkling, sputtering liquid dripped into the openings that suddenly appeared. Derek Van Dorn was avenged.

"Destroy! Destroy!" yelled Karl madly. A microphone hung before him and his words rang through every vessel of his convoy.

THE lust of battle was upon him. A fleet of the Zar's aeros had risen from below; twenty of them at least. These would be manned by Moon creatures, he knew, and would carry all of the dreadful weapons which had originated on that strange body. But he did not know that his own ships were insulated against most of the rays used by the Zar's forces. He knew only that he must fight; fight and kill; exterminate every last one of the Zar's adherents or be exterminated in the attempt.

Kill! Kill! The madness was contagious. His pilot was a marvel and drove his ship straight for the massed ships of the foe. The air was vivid with light-streamers. A ray from an enemy vessel struck the thick glass of the port through which he looked and the outer surface was shattered and pock-marked. But a cloud of vapor and a dripping stream of fiery liquid told him his own ray had taken effect on a vessel of the enemy. One! They wheeled about and spiraled, coming up under another of the Zar's aeros. It vanished in a puff of steam and they narrowly missed being covered by the falling remnants of incandescent liquid. Two! Karl's aim was good and he gloated in the fact. Three! They climbed and turned over, dropping again into the fray. Four!

The air grew stifling, for the expended energy of the enemies' rays must needs be absorbed. It could not disintegrate them nor decompose their bodies, but the contacts were many and the liberation of heat enormous. They were suffocating! But Karl would not desist. They drove on, now beneath, now above an enemy ship. He lost count.

One of his own vessels was in trouble. The report came to him from the little speaker at his ear. He looked around in alarm. A glowing object reeled uncertainly over there between two of the aeros of the Zar. The concentration of beams of vibrations was too much for the sturdy craft. It was red hot and its occupants burned alive where they sat. Suddenly it slipped into a spin and went slithering down into the city, leaving a gaping opening where it fell. This sobered him some-

what, but he went into the battle with renewed fury.

HOW many had they brought down? Fifteen? Sixteen? He tore his purple jacket from his body. The perspiration rolled from his pores. His own ship would be next. But what did it matter? Kill! Kill! He shouted once more into the microphone, then dived into battle. Another and another! In Heaven's name, how many were there? It was maddening. If only he could breathe. His lungs were seared; his eyes smarting from the heat. And then it was over.

Three of the Zar's aeros remained, and these turned tail to run for it. No! They were falling, nose down, under full power; diving into the city from which they had come. Suicide? Yes. They couldn't face the recriminations that must come to them. And anything was better than facing that burning death from the strange little fighters which had come from out the skies. Dorn was a mass of wreckage.

Karl tore at the fastenings of the ports, searing his fingers on the heated metal. His pilot had collapsed, the little aero heading madly skyward with no guiding hand. Air! They must have air! He loosened the pilot's jacket; slapped frantically at his wrists in the effort to bring him to consciousness. Then he was at the controls of the vessel, tugging on first one, then the other. The aero circled and spun, executing the most dangerous of sideslips and dives. A little voice was speaking to him—the voice of the radio—instructing him. In a daze he followed instructions as best he could. The whirlings of the earth stabilized after a time and he found he was flying the vessel; climbing rapidly.

A SENSE of power came to him as the little voice of the radio continued to instruct. Here were the controls of the electronic motor; there the gravity-energy. He was proceeding in the wrong direction. But what did it matter? He learned the meaning of the tiny figures of the altimeter; the difference between the points of the compass. Still he drove on.

"East! Turn East!" begged the little voice from the radio. "You're heading west. Your speed—a thousand kilometers an hour—it's too fast. Turn back, Zar Peter!"

He tore the loud speaker of the radio from its fastenings. West! He wanted to go west! On and on he sped, becoming more and more familiar with the workings of the little vessel as he progressed. A cooling breeze whistled from the opened ports, a breeze that smelled of the sea. His heart sang with the wonder of it all. He could fly. And fly he did. Zar Peter? Never! He knew now where he belonged; knew what he wanted. He'd find the coast of North America. Follow it until he located New York. A landing would be easy, for had not the voice instructed him in the use of the gravity-energy? He'd make his way to the lower levels, to the little book shop of Rudolph Krassin. A suit of gray denim awaited him there and he'd never discard it.

ONWARD he sped into the night which was falling fast. He held to his westward course like a veteran of the air lanes. The pilot had ceased to breathe and Karl was sorry. Game little devil, that pilot. Have to shove his body overboard. Too bad.

Rudolph's brother would understand. He'd be watching in the detectoscope. And the others—those who had wished to seat him on a throne—they'd understand, too. They'd have to!

Rudolph would forgive him, he knew. Paul Van Dorn—his own cousin—the secret agents of the Zar would never locate him! Too many friends of Rudolph's were of the red police.

He gave himself over to happy thoughts as the little aero sped on in the darkness. Home! He was going home! Back to the gray denim, where he belonged and where now he would remain content.

The Ape-Men of Xlotli

By David R. Sparks

CHAPTER I

KIRBY did not know what mountains they were. He did know that the Mannlicher bullets of eleven bad Mexicans were whining over his head and whizzing past the hoofs of his galloping, stolen horse. The shots were mingled with yelps which pretty well curdled his spine. In the circumstances, the unknown range of snow mountains towering blue and white beyond the arid, windy plateau, offering he could not tell what dangers, seemed a paradise. Looking at them, Kirby laughed harshly to himself.

A beautiful face in the depths of a geyser—and Kirby plunges into a desperate mid-Earth conflict with the dreadful Feathered Serpent.

As he dug the

His head wavered back and forth and his hiss filled the night.

heels of his aviator's boots into the stallion's flanks, the animal galloped even faster than before, and Kirby took hope. Then more bullets and more yelps made him think that his advantage might prove only temporary. Nevertheless, he laughed again, and as he became accustomed to the feel of a stallion under him, he even essayed a few pistol shots back at the pack of frantic, swarthy devils he had fooled.

Three hours ago he had been eating

a peaceful breakfast with his friend and commandant, Colonel Miguel de Castanar, in the sunlit patio of the commandant's hacienda. Castanar, chief of the air patrol for the district, had waxed enthusiastic over the suppression of last spring's revolutionists and the cowed state of up-country bandits. Captain Freddie Kirby, American instructor of flying to Mexican pilots in the making, had agreed with him and asked for one of the Wasps and three days' leave with which to go visiting in Laredo. The simple matter of a broken fuel line, a forced landing two hundred kilometres from nowhere, and the unlucky proximity of the not-so-cowed horsemen, were the things which had changed the day from what it had been to what it was.

The one piece of good fortune which had befallen him since the bandits had surrounded the wrecked Wasp, looted it, and taken its lone pilot prisoner, was the break he was getting now. During the squadron's first halt to feed, he had knocked down his guards and made a bolt for the grazing stallion. So far, the attempt was proving worth while.

ON and on the stallion lunged toward the white mountains. Kirby's eyes became red rimmed now from fatigue and the glare of the sun and the dust of the pitilessly bare plateau. A negligible scalp wound under his mop of straw-colored hair, slight as it was, did not add to his comfort. But still he would not give up, for the horse, as if it sensed what its rider needed most, was making directly for a narrow ravine which debouched on the plateau from the nearest mountain flank.

It was the promise of cover afforded by the jagged rocks and jungle growth of that ravine which kept hope alive in Kirby's throbbing brain.

The stallion was blown and staggering. Foam from the heavily bitted mouth flashed back in great yellow flakes against Kirby's dust-caked aviator's tunic. But just the same, the five mile gallop had carried both horse and rider beyond range of any but the most expert rifle shot. And Kirby knew that if his own splendid mount was almost ready to crash, the horses of his pursuers must be in worse shape still. So for the third time since the fight had begun, he laughed. This time there was no harshness, but only relief, in the sound which came from his dry lips.

Ten minutes later, he flung himself out of his saddle. Like the caress of a vast, soothing hand, the shadowed coolness of the ravine lay upon him. As his feet struck ground, they splashed in the water overflowing from a spring at the base of an immense rock. At once Kirby dropped the reins on the stallion's neck, giving him his freedom, and as the horse lowered his head to drink, Kirby stooped also.

There was cover everywhere. Kirby's first move after pulling both himself and the horse away from the spring, was to glance up the long, deeply shaded canyon which he had entered—a gash hacked into the breast of the steep mountain as by a titanic ax. Then, reassured as to the possibilities for a defensive retreat, he glanced back toward the dazzling, bare plateau.

IT was what he saw taking place amongst the sombreroed bandits out there which made the grin of satisfaction fade from his broad mouth. His last glace backward, before bolting into the canyon mouth, had showed him a ragged squadron of men left far behind, yet galloping after him still. But now—

Presently a puzzled frown made wrinkles in Freddie Kirby's wide, sunburned forehead. He relaxed his grip upon his heavy Luger, which, in his big hands, looked like a cap pistol, and rubbed his eyes.

But he was not mistaken. The horsemen had halted! Out there on the glaring, alkali-arid plateau, they were standing as still as so many statues.

Looking toward the canyon mouth which had swallowed their quarry, they certainly were, but they were halted as completely as men struck dead.

"Huh," Kirby grunted, and scratched behind his ear.

The next second he swung around to look at his horse, uncertain what he was going to do next, but aware of the fact that right now, with a lot of unknown country between himself and Castanar's sunlit patio, the stallion was gong to be a friend in need.

As he turned, however, prepared to take up the loose reins, something else happened. The stallion let out a neigh as shrill as a trumpet blast. As Kirby jumped, grabbed for the bridle, his fingers found empty air. Like a crazy animal the stallion leaped past him, barely missing him. Out toward the plain the horse jumped, out and away from the shaded canyon mouth, out toward the spot where other horses waited. And despite the animal's blown condition, the speed he put into his retreat left Kirby dazed.

AFTER a helpless, profanity-filled second, Kirby scratched behind his ear again. As certain as the fact that almost his sole hope of getting back to civilization depended upon the stallion, was the fact that the brute did not intend to stop running until he dropped.

"Now what in the hell ever got into his crazy head?" Kirby muttered grimly.

Then he turned around to glance up the shadow-filled slash of a canyon, and sniffed.

"Huh!"

Faintly in the air had risen an odor the like of which he had never encountered in his life. A combination, it was, of the unforgetable stench which hangs over a battlefield when the dead are long unburied, and of a fragrance more rare, more heady, more poignantly sweet than any essence ever concocted by Parisian perfumer.

With the drifting scent came a sound. Faint, carrying from a distance, the rumble which Kirby heard was almost certainly that of a geyser.

There was no telling what had brought the troop of horsemen to a halt, but after a time Kirby knew that the cause of his horse's sudden departure must have been a whiff of the strange perfume.

FOR a long time he stoood still, watching the crazy stallion dwindle in size, watching the line of unexpectedly timid bandits. Then, when it became apparent that the horsemen were going to stay put either until he came out, or showed that he never was coming out, he shrugged, and swung on his heel so that he faced up the canyon.

The odor was dying away now, and the geyser rumble was gone. In Kirby's heart came a mingled feeling of tense uneasiness and fascinated curiosity. Momentarily he was almost glad that his horse *had* bolted, and that his pursuers *were* blocking any lane of retreat except that offered by the canyon. If things had been different, the queer behavior of the Mexicans, the unaccountable actions of his horse and the equally strange growth of his own uneasiness might have made him uncertain whether he would go up the canyon or not. Now it was the only thing to do, and Kirby was glad because, fear or no fear, he wanted to go on.

"I wonder," he said out loud as he started, "just what the denizens of First Street in Kansas would say to a layout like this!"

CHAPTER II

AT the end of an hour he was still wondering.

At midday the canyon was chill and dank, lit only by a half light which at times dwindled to a deep dusk as the rock walls beetled together hundreds of feet above his head. Always when he stumbled through one of the dark-

est passages, he heard and half saw immense gray bats flapping above him. In the half-lit reaches, he hardly took a step without seeing great rats with gray coats, yellow teeth, and evil pink eyes. But rats and bats combined were not as bad as the snakes. They were almost white, and nowhere had he seen rattlers of such size. If his caution relaxed for a second, they struck at him with fangs as long and sharp as needles.

The tortured, twisted cedars, the paloverdi, occatilla, cholla, opunti, through which he edged his laborious way, all offered an almost animate, armed hostility.

Altogether this journey was the least sweet he had taken anywhere. Yet he went on.

Why had eleven Mexican bandits refused to advance even to within decent rifle range of the canyon's mouth? What was there about the putrid yet gorgeous perfume that had made the stallion go off his nut, so to speak?

After a time, Kirby veered away from a fourteen-foot rattler which flashed in a loathsome coil on his left hand. Hungry, weakened by all he had been through since breakfast time, he plodded doggedly on.

But a moment later he stumbled past a twisted cedar, and then stopped, forgetting even the snakes.

At his feet lay the bleached skeleton of a man.

BESIDE the right hand, in a position which indicated that only the final relaxation of death had loosened his grip upon a precious object, lay a cylinder, carefully carved, of rich, yellow gold.

Of the science of anthropology Kirby knew enough to make him sure that the dolicocephalic skull and characteristically shaped pelvic and thigh bones of the skeleton had belonged to a white man.

As for the cylinder— But he was not so sure what that was.

Regardless of the dry swish of a rattler's body on the rocks behind him, he lifted the object from the spot in which it had lain for no man knew how long. Of much the size and shape of an old-time cylindrical wax phonograph record, the softly gleaming thing weighed, he judged, almost two pounds.

Two pounds of soft, virgin gold of a quality as fine as any he had seen amongst all the treasures brought out of Mexico, Yucatan, and Peru combined!

But the gold was not the only thing. If Kirby was human enough to think in terms of treasure, he was also enough of an amateur anthropologist to hold his breath over the carvings on the yellow surface.

First he recognized the ancient symbols of Sun and Moon. And then a representation, semi-realistic, semi-conventionalized, of Quetzalcoatl, the Feathered Serpent, known in all the annals of primitive Mexican religions.

Good enough.

But the mere symbols by no means told the whole story of the cylinder. The workmanship was archaic, older than any Aztec art Kirby knew, older than Toltec, older far, he ventured to guess, than even earliest archaic Mayan carvings.

God, what a find!

FOR a moment it seemed almost impossible that he, Freddie Kirby, native of Kansas, unromantic aviator, should have been the one to discover this relic of an unknown, lost race. Yet the cylinder of gold was there, in his hand.

After a long minute Kirby looked around him, then listened.

From up the canyon came the provocative rumble of the geyser. It was closer now, and Kirby, glancing at his watch which had been spared to him in the Wasp's crash, noted that just forty-four minutes had passed since the last eruption. There was nothing to be done about the bleached skeleton. So, tucking the precious cylinder into

his tunic, Kirby headed on up the gash of a canyon.

Far away indeed seemed the neat, maple-shaded asphalt street, the rows of parked cars and farm wagons, the telephone office and drug store and bank, of the Kansas town where he had grown up.

Time passed until again he heard the geyser, and again was dizzied by the perfume. As the fragrance—close and powerful now—died away, he flailed with one arm at a two-foot bat which flapped close to his head.

And then he trudged his dogged way around a deeply shadowed bend, and found the chasm not only almost wholly dark, but narrower than it had been at any previous point.

"Holy mackerel," Kirby groaned. "Phew! If this keeps up, I—"

He stopped. His jaw dropped.

"Oh, hell!"

The beetling walls narrowed in until the gash was scarcely fifteen feet wide. Further progress was barred by a smooth wall which rose sheer in front of him.

KIRBY did not know how many seconds passed before he made out through the gloom that the wall was man-made and carved with the same symbols of Sun, Moon, and Feathered Serpent, which ornamented the cylinder of gold. But when he did realize at last, the shout with which he expressed his feeling was anything but a groan.

It simply meant that the skeleton which once had been a man, had almost surely found the golden cylinder beyond the wall and not in the canyon. And if the dead man had passed that smooth, carved barrier, another man could do it!

Kirby jumped forward, began to search in the darkness for some hidden entrance.

Minute after minute passed. He gave another cry. He saw a long, upright crack in the stone surface, and a quick push of his hands made the stones in front of him give almost an inch.

All at once his shoulder was planted, and behind that square shoulder was straining all the muscle of his two hundred pound body. The result was all that he desired. When he ceased pushing, a slab of rock gaped wide befor him, giving entrance to a pitch dark tunnel.

For a moment he held the portal back, then, releasing his pressure, he stepped into the dark passage. By the time a ponderous grating of rocks assured him that the door had swung shut of its own weight, he had produced matches and struck a light.

THE puny flame showed him a curving passage hewn smoothly through the heart of bedrock. Before the flare died he walked twenty feet, and as another match burned to his fingers, he found the right hand curve of the passage giving way to a left hand twist. After that he dared use no more of his precious matches. But just when the darkness was beginning to wear badly on his nerves, he uttered a low cry.

As he increased his rapid walk to a run, the faint light he had suddenly seen ahead of him grew until it became a circular flare of daylight which marked the tunnel's end.

Out of the passage Kirby strode with shoulders square and head up, his cool, level, practical blue eyes wide with wonder. Out of the tunnel he strode into the valley of the perfumed geyser.

"God above!"

The words were vibrant with hoarse reverence. He saw the sunlight of a cliff-surrounded diminutive Garden of Eden. He saw a vale of flowering grass, of palms and live oaks, saw patches of lilies so huge as to transcend belief, and dizzying clumps of tree cactus almost as tall as the palms themselves.

What was more, he saw in the center of this upland, cliff-guarded valley, a gaping black orifice which every fac-

ulty of judgment told him was the mouth of the geyser of perfume. And beside it, outstretched on a smooth sheet of rock which glistened as though coated with a layer of clear, sparkling glass, he saw—

KIRBY blinked his eyes rapidly, hardly believing what he saw.

On the glistening rock lay the perfectly preserved figure of a Spanish Conquistádore in full armor. Morion and breast-plate were in place, and glistened as though they had been burnished this morning. And the Spaniard's dark, handsome, bearded face! Kirby saw instantly that no decay had touched it, that even the hairs of the beard were perfect. The whole armor-clad corpse gleamed softly with a covering of the same glassy substance which covered the rock.

Kirby glanced at his watch, saw that twelve minutes must elapse before the geyser spouted again. Then his eyes narrowed. He remained standing where he was, hard by the mouth of the tunnel, knowing that a wise man would conduct cautiously his exploration of this valley of wonders.

Arsenic! Silicon!

The two words stood out sharply in his thought. In Africa existed plenty of springs whose waters contained enough arsenic to bring death to those who drank. Might not the Spaniard's presence here be explained, then, by assuming that the geyser water was charged with a strong arsenic content, and, in addition, with some sort of silicon solution which, left to dry in the air, hardened to glass?

Lord, what a discovery to take back with him to Kansas! Almost it made the discovery of the golden cylinder pale by comparison. Why, the commercial uses to which this silicon water might be put were almost without limit, and the owner of the concession might confidently expect to make millions!

It was while Kirby stood there, breathless and jubilant, waiting for the geyser to spout, that he began to feel that *he was being watched.*

Suddenly, with a start, he shot a sweeping glance over the whole grove. But that did no good. He saw nothing save sunlight and waving green leaves.

Eleven days were to pass before he discovered all that was to be involved in that sensation of being gazed at by unseen eyes.

CHAPTER III

AT the beginning of the eleventh morning in the valley, Kirby had again posted himself close to the mouth of the black tunnel, and again felt that hidden eyes were observing him.

But this morning differed from the first morning, because now, for the first time, he was ready to do something about the watcher or watchers. Exploration of the whole valley had not helped. Therefore, there lay at his feet a considerable coil of rope, the manufacture of which from plaited strands of the tough grass in his Eden had taken him whole days. With what patience he could find, he was waiting for the gigantic spout of milky-colored, perfumed water which would mean that the geyser had gone off and would erupt no more for exactly forty-four minutes.

Eleven days in the valley!

While he waited, Kirby considered them. Who had made the beautiful footprints beside him, when he had slept at last after his arrival here? Why had so many of the queer, fuzzy topped shrubs with immense yam-shaped roots, which grew here been taken away during that first sleep, and during all his other periods of sleep? Who had taken them? Early in his stay, he had learned that the tuberlike roots were good to eat and would sustain life, and he supposed that the unseen people of the valley took them for food. But who were these people of the valley?

Who had laid beside him during his first sleep the immense lily with per-

fume like that which came with the milky geyser spray — that spray of death and delight mingled? Why had someone scratched a line in the earth from him directly to the distant orifice of the geyser? Was this, as he believed, a signal to come not only to the edge of the orifice, *but to lower himself down into its depths?* And if the line were intended as a signal, did the persons who came to the valley while he slept, always eluding him, wish him well or mean to do him harm?

Last question of all: had the beautiful girl's face he believed he had seen just once, been real or an hallucination? It had been while he was kneeling at the very edge of the geyser cone, staring down its many colored throat, that the vision had appeared. Misty white amidst the green gloom, the face had been turned up to him, smiling, its lips forming a kiss, and its great eyes beckoning. Had the face been real or a dream?

Eleven days in the valley! Now, with his braided rope ready at last, he was going to do something which might help to answer his questions.

KIRBY reached out and began to run his grass rope, yard by yard, through his hands, searching carefully for any flaw. A canyon wren made the air sweet above him, while the morning sun began to wink and blink against the shadows which still lay against the face of the guardian cliffs. Kirby glanced at his watch and got up.

Crossing beyond the mouth of the geyser, he grinned good morning at his friend the Conquistadore, and marched on into the shade of the live oak which grew nearest the geyser. Here he made one end of his rope fast to the gnarled trunk, inspected his pistol, patted his tunic to make sure that the cylinder of gold was safe, then stood by to await the geyser.

With the passing of three minutes there came from the still empty orifice a sonorous rumbling. Kirby grinned.

From deep in the earth issued a sound of fizzing and bubbling, and then, to the accompaniment of subterranean thunder, burst loose the milky, upward column which had never ceased to awe the man who watched so eagerly this morning. As the titanic jet leaped skyward now, the slanting rays of the sun caught it, and turned the water, fanning out, into a fire opal, into a sheet of living color.

Kirby, hard headed to the last, drew from the supply in one pocket of his tunic, a strip of one of the tuberlike roots, and munched it.

The thunder ceased. The waters receded.

After that Kirby hesitated not a second. Promptly he moved forward, flung his coil of line down into the geyser tunnel, and swung on to the line. By the time he had swallowed the last bite of his breakfast, the world he knew had been left behind, and he was climbing down to a new.

IT became at once apparent that the gorgeously colored, glassy-smooth throat glowed with tints which were unfamiliar to him. He could perceive these new shades of color, yet had no name for them.

As he stopped after fifty feet to breathe, the color phenomenon made him wonder if the tuber roots he had been eating had affected his vision; then decided they had not. In addition to food value, the roots had some power to stimulate courage and a slight mental exhiliration. But the drug had proved non-habit forming, and Kirby knew that his powers of perception were not now, and never had been, affected.

He swung down further.

Just a moment after he began that progress was when things began to happen to him. First he heard what seemed to be the low titter of a human voice laughing sweetly. Next came a far off, unutterably lovely strumming of music. And then he realized that, at a depth of about a hundred feet, he was hanging level

with a hole which marked the mouth of another tunnel.

This new tunnel sloped down into the earth on his right hand. The floor and walls were glassy smooth, and the angle of descent was steep, but by no means as steep as the drop of the vertical geyser shaft in which he now hung.

Laughter, music, the new tunnel suddenly aroused an excitement which made him quiver.

"When I saw *her*," he gasped, "she was standing here, in the mouth of this tunnel, looking up at me!"

Violently, Freddie Kirby forgot the maple-shaded street of his Kansas town, forgot everything but desire to reach the mouth of the new tunnel, where the girl of the exquisite face and beckoning lips had stood. Tightening his grip on the rope, he began to swing himself back and forth like a pendulum.

It seemed probable that when the geyser water shot up past the horizontal tunnel, its force was so great that no water at all entered. He redoubled his efforts to widen his swing.

THEN his feet scraped on the floor, and in a second he had alighted there. He still hung stoutly to his line, however, for the tunnel sloped down sharply enough, and was slippery enough, to prohibit the maintenance of footing unaided.

The music which issued from the depths of that stunningly mysterious passage swelled to a crescendo—and stopped. Kirby clung there to his precarious perch, his feet slipping on the glass under them with every move he made, and feelings stirred in his heart which had never been there before.

Then, as silence reigned where the music had been, something prompted him to look up. The next instant he stifled a cry.

With widening eyes he saw the flash of a white arm and the gleam of a knife hovering over the spot where his taut rope passed out of the geyser opening into the sunshine of the outer world. Again he stifled a cry. For crying out would do no good. While the suppressed sound was still on his lips, the knife flickered.

Then Kirby was shooting downward, the severed line whipping out after him. The first plunge flung him off his feet. A long swoop which he took on his back dizzied him. But as the fall continued, he was able to slow it a little by bracing arms and legs against the tunnel walls.

"Holy Jeehosophat!" he gurgled.

But there seemed to be no particular danger. The slide was as smooth as most of the chutes he had ever encountered at summer swimming pools. If ever the confounded spiral passage came to an end, he might find that he was still all right. As seconds passed and he fell and fell, it seemed that he was bound for the center of the earth. It seemed that—

HE swished around a multiple bend, and eyes which had been accustomed to darkness were blinded by light.

It was light which radiated in all colors—blue, yellow, browns, purples, reds, pinks, and then all the new colors for which he had no name. Somehow Kirby knew that he had shot out of the tunnel, which emerged high up in the face of a cliff, and that he was dropping through perfumed, brilliant air resonant with the sound of birds and insects and human cries. The funny thing was that the pull of gravity was not right, somehow, and he was dropping fairly slowly. From far below, a body of what looked like water was sweeping up to meet him. Kirby closed his eyes.

When he opened them again, his whole body was stinging with the slap of his impact, and he found that it *was* water which he had struck. The proof of it lay in the fact that he was swimming, and was approaching a shore.

But such water! It was milky white

and perfumed as the geyser flow had been, and it seemed luminous as with a radium fire. Had he not realized presently that the fluid probably contained enough arsenic to finish a thousand like him, he would have thought of himself as bathing in the waters of Paradise.

But then he began to forget about the poison which might already be at work upon him.

Ahead of him, stretched out in the gorgeous, colored light, ran a beach which was backed by heavy jungle. And on the beach stood the lovely creatures, all clad in shimmering, glistening garments, whose flutelike cries had come to him as he fell.

KIRBY looked, and became almost powerless to continue his swim. The beauty of those frail women was like the reputed beauty of bright angels. That paralyzing effect of wonder, however, did not last long.

The girls moved forward to the water's edge, and, laughing amongst themselves, beckoned to him with lovely slender hands whose every motion was a caress.

"Be not afraid," called one in a curious patois dialect, about five-sixths of which seemed made up of Spanish words, distorted but recognizable.

"The water would kill you," called another, "as it killed the Spaniard in armor. But we are here to save you. I will give you a draught to drink which will defeat the poison. Come on to us!"

Kirby's heart was almost literally in his mouth now, because the girl who promised him salvation was she whose lips had formed a kiss at him from the green-gloomy throat of the geyser.

His feet struck a shale bottom. Panting, he stood up and was conscious of the fact that despite his forlornly dripping and dishevelled condition, he was tall and straight and big, and that for some reason all of the girls on the gleaming sand, and one girl in particular, were anxious to receive him here.

The one girl had drawn a small, gleaming flask of gold from the misty bodice of her gown, and was holding it out while she laughed with red lips and great, dazzling dark eyes.

"*Pronto!*" she called in pure Spanish, and other girls echoed the word. "Oh," went on the bright owner of the flask, "we thought you would *never* have done with your work on the rope. It took you so long!"

KIRBY left the smooth lake behind him and stood dripping on the sand. The moment the air touched his clothes, he felt that they were stiffening slightly. Yet the sensation brought no terror. He could not feel terror as he faced the girls.

"Give him the flask, Naida!" someone exclaimed.

"Ah, but the Gods *have* been kind to us!" echoed another.

The girl with the flask made a gesture for silence.

"Is it Naida you are called?" Kirby put in quickly, and as he spoke the Spanish words, the roll of them on his tongue did much to make him know that he was sane and awake, and not dreaming, that this was still the Twentieth Century, and that he was Freddie Kirby.

Answering his question, Naida nodded, and gave him the flask.

"A single draught will act as antidote to the poison," she said.

"I drink," said Kirby as he raised the flask, "to the many of you who have been so gracious as to save me!"

A flashing smile, a blush was his answer. And then he had wetted his lips with, and was swallowing, a limpid liquid which tasted of some drug.

"Enough!" Naida ordered in a second.

As she reached for the flask, her companions closed in as though a ceremony of some sort had been completed.

"Is it time to tell him yet, Naida?" piped one of the girls, younger than the rest, whom someone had called Elana.

"Oh, *do* begin, Naida," chorused two more. "We can't wait *much* longer to find out if he is going to help us!"

Kirby turned to Naida, while a soothing sensation crept through him from the draught he had taken.

"Pray tell me what it is that I am to be permitted to do for you. I can promise you that the whole of my life and strength, and such intelligence as I possess, is yours to command."

EXCITED small cries and a clapping of hands answered him. As for Naida, her face lighted with glowing joy.

"Oh, one who could say that, *must* be the friend and protector of whom we have stood in such bitter need!"

"What," asked Kirby, "is this need which made one of you cut my rope, so that I should come here?"

A momentary silence was broken only by the hum of insects in the perfumed air, and by the golden thrilling of a bird back in the jungle. Then Kirby beheld Naida bowing to him.

"So be it," she said in a voice low and flutelike. "I will speak now since you request it. Already you have seen that you are here in our world because we conspired amongst ourselves to bring you here. Our reason—"

She paused, looked deep into his eyes.

"Amigo," she continued slowly, "we whom you see here are the People of the Temple. For more centuries than even our sages can tell, our progenitors have dwelt here, where you find us, knowing always of your outer world, but remaining always unknown by it. But now the time has come when those of us who are left amongst our race need the help of one from the outer races we have shunned. Dangers of various orders confront us who have waited here for your coming. When we first discovered you in the Valley of the Geyser, the idea came to me that we must make you understand our troubles, and ask of you—"

But then she stopped.

As Kirby stared at her, the gentleness of her expression was replaced by a swift strength which made her majestic.

The next moment bedlam reigned upon the beach.

"They are after us!" gasped one of the girls in terror. "Quick, Naida! Quick! Quick!"

WHATEVER it was that threatened, Naida did not need to be told that the need for action was pressing. She shouted at her companions some order which Kirby did not understand. From a pouch at her side, she snatched out a greyish, spherical vegetable substance which looked almost like a tennis ball. Then she braced herself as if to withstand an assault.

"Stand back!" she cried to Kirby.

He had long ago ceased to wonder at anything that might happen here. Disappointed that Naida's story had been interrupted, wondering what was wrong, he obeyed Naida's order to keep clear.

As he fell back and stood motionless, there came from behind a dense screen of shrubs which would have resembled aloe and prickly pear bushes, save that they were as big as oak trees, a ghastly howling. The next second, hopped and hurtled across the beach toward the girls, a group of hair-covered, shaggy creatures which were neither apes nor men. The faces, contorted with lust, were hideously leathery and brown, the foreheads small and beetling, and the mouths enormous, with immense yellow teeth.

Helpless, Kirby realized that Naida and all the others had clapped over their faces curious masks which seemed to be made of some crystalline substance, and that now others had armed themselves with the tennis balls. And that was the last observation he made before the battle opened furiously.

With a cry muffled behind her mask, Naida leaped out in front of her squadron and cut loose her queer

vegetable ball with whizzing aim and force.

Full into the snarling face of one of the ape-men the thing smashed, filling the air all about the creature with a yellow, mistlike powder. Kirby was half deafened by the yells of rage and terror which went up from the entire attacking band. The creature who had been hit fell to his knees the while he made agonized tearing movements at his face and uttered shrill, jabbering yelps.

Other balls flashed instantly from Naida's ranks, and each brought about the same ghastly result as the first. But then Kirby saw that the whole jungle seethed with the hairy, awful men.

"Keep back!" Naida shrieked at him through her mask. "We have no mask for you. If the powder from our fungi touches you, it will be the end!"

WITH gaps in the advancing line filled as soon as each screeching ape went down, the attackers leaped on until Kirby knew they would be upon the girls in a matter of seconds. A sweat broke out on his neck.

But then an idea gripped him, and suddenly, without even a last glance at Naida, he leaped away even as she had commanded.

A great boulder lay on the shore fifty yards away. Toward it Kirby streaked as though he had become coward. But he had not turned coward.

By the time he reached the shelter which would protect him from the fungus mist, a turning point had come in the battle. The ape-men had closed in on the girls, were swarming about them, and the mist balls had almost ceased to fly. But the thing which gave Kirby hope was that the apes were not attempting to harm the girls. They seemed victors, but they were not committing atrocities.

It was the sharp intuition that something like this might happen which had sent Kirby fleeing from the fight. He believed he might yet prove useful.

The thickest group of attackers were jostling about Naida. As the screams and sobs of the girls quivered out, mingled with the gutteral roaring of the men, Naida was shut off by a solid wall of aggressors.

Then Kirby saw her again. But now two of the most powerful of the ape-men had caught her up and was carrying her. Her kicking and writhing and biting accomplished nothing. The apes were headed directly back to the jungle.

NOW, however, most of the yellow mist had disappeared, and that was all Kirby had been waiting for. With a growling shout, he tore out from behind his boulder, his Luger ready. Naida's captors were in full retreat, and other pairs of men were snatching up other girls and hopping after them. Toward Naida Kirby ran madly but not blindly.

"Naida! Naida!" he bellowed.

He got in two strides for every one the apes made.

"Naida!" he shouted, and at last saw her look at him.

Her face was pallid with loathing and terror. As her glimmering dark eyes met his, they flashed a plea which made his heart thrash against his lungs.

With a final roar of encouragement Kirby closed in on the hair-covered men, and fired instantly a shot which caught one full in the heart. The creature wavered on its legs, looked at the unexpected enemy with dismayed, swinish little red eyes, and relaxing his hold upon Naida, dropped without making a sound.

After that—

But suddenly Kirby found himself unable to comprehend fully the other terrific results of his intervention. Before the echoes of his shot died, there came to him the rumble of what seemed to be tons of falling rock. In the bright air a slight mist was precipitated. To all of which was added the effect upon the ape-men of fear of a weapon and a type of fighter utterly new to them.

Kirby had fired believing that he

would have to fight other ape-men when the first fell. But not so. Instead of that—

HE blinked rapidly as he took in the scene.

Naida had been released. Lying on the sand beside the dead ape-man, she was looking up at him in stupefied wonder. And her other captor, instead of remaining to fight, had clapped shaggy hands over his ears, and was leaping headlong for the protection of the jungle!

Moreover, the soprano cries of the girls and the deep howls of the men were rising everywhere, and everywhere the ape-men were dropping their captives and plunging away after their leader.

"Huh," Kirby muttered aloud, and wondered what the citizens of Kansas would have to say about *this*.

Naida looked at the dead and bleeding ape-man and shuddered, and then at the score or so of others brought down by the puff balls. Then she looked up at Kirby, raised her arms for his support, and smiled up into his brown face.

Kirby forgot Kansas, lifted her, warm and alive, radiantly beautiful, in his arms.

"Our friends the enemies," she whispered as she remained for a second in his embrace and then drew away, "will attack no more this day—thanks to you."

There was no possible need for another shot, Kirby saw. In terrified silence, the first of the apes had already foundered behind the prickly pear and aloe bushes, and the last stragglers were using all the power in their legs to catch up. On the beach, Naida's followers were picking themselves up, and already a few of them had burst into ringing laughter.

"Come on, all of you," Naida said to them, and, including Kirby in her glance, added, "We may as well go to the caciques now, and have it over with."

CHAPTER IV

IT was with Naida at his side and the other girls grouped about them, that they started their journey to the "caciques," whoever they might be, "to have it over with," whatever that might mean. As they strode along in silence, Kirby did what he could to straighten out in his mind the many curious things which had happened since he sat testing his rope in the upper world, this morning.

In final analysis, it seemed to him that, extraordinary as his experience had been, there was nothing so much out of the way about it, after all. The only unusual thing was the existence of this inhabited pocket in the earth. For the rest, the strange colors to which he could not put a name, were simply some manifestation of infra-reds and ultra-violets. And then the startling effect of his single shot at the ape-men—that was simply the old story of savage creatures running from a new weapon and a new enemy; naturally the shot had sounded loud in this enclosed cavern. Lastly, the pull of gravity down here seemed upset somehow. But why should it not seem so at this distance within the earth? The American was no scientist; the conclusions he reached seemed very reasonable to him.

All told, the last thing Kirby found he needed to do was pinch himself to see if he was awake.

A place of indefinite extent, the cavern seemed to be exactly what he had already judged it—a giant pocket within the earth. The ceiling, or the sky, was of some kind of natural glass—no doubt the same kind which was crackling on his clothes now—and from it emanated the brilliant, many colored glow which lighted the cavern. Radium? Perhaps it was that. Perhaps the rays were cast off from some other element even less understood than mysterious radium. As for the plant and animal life with which the cavern teemed, it was amazing.

BUT Kirby did not give himself up to silent observation any longer.

"Will you finish telling me," he asked of Naida, "about the task I am to perform for you here?"

Naida, walking with lithe strides along a path jungle-hemmed on both sides, smiled at him.

"You are to be our leader."

"Yes?"

Now both Naida and the other girls became sober.

"You will lead us in a revolt."

"Ah!" Kirby whistled softly.

"In a revolt against the caciques—the wise men—whose kind have governed the People of the Temple since the beginning."

Her statement was received with acclaim by the whole troop, who crowded close around, the while they smiled at Kirby.

"You mean I am to lead a revolt," he asked, "against these same caciques whom we are going now to face?"

Naida nodded emphatically.

"Yes, if revolt proves necessary. And it probably will."

"Hum." Kirby scratched behind his ear. "You'd better tell me what you can about it."

THEN, as they hurried on, Naida spoke rapidly.

The situation before the People of the Temple was that for a long time now, the only children to be born had been girls. Worse still, not even a girl had been born during a period equal to sixteen upper-world years. The only remaining members of a race which had flourished in this underground land for countless thousands of years, consisted of the caciques, a handful of aged people, and the thirty-four girls, including Naida, who accompanied Kirby now.

On one hand was promised extinction through lack of reproduction. On the other, even swifter and more terrible extinction at the hands of the ape-men, whom Naida called the Worshippers of Xlotli, the Rabbit God, the God of all bestiality and drunkenness.

It was the menace of the ape-men, rather than the less appalling one of lack of reproduction, which was making the most trouble now. Ages ago, when the People of the Temple had flourished as a race, they had been untroubled by the Worshippers of Xlotli. But now the ape-men were by far the stronger; and they desired the girls who had been born as the last generation of an ancient race. The battle of this morning had been only one of many.

Dissention between the caciques, who ruled the People of the Temple, and their girl subjects, had arisen on the subject of the best way of dealing with the ape-man menace.

SOME time ago, Naida, heading a council of all the girls, had proposed to the caciques that support be sought amongst the people of the upper world. This would be done judiciously, by bringing to the lower realm a few men who were wise and strong, men who would make good husbands, and who could fight the ape-men.

This proposal the priests had promptly quashed. They would never receive, they said, any members of the teeming outer races from whom the People of the Temple had so long been hidden. Those few who had blundered into the Valley of the Geyser during the centuries, and who had never escaped, were enough. Better, said the caciques, that a compromise be arranged with the subjects of the Rabbit God.

Flatly then, the priests had proposed that some of the girls, the number to be specified later, should be given to the ape-men, and peace won. During the time of reprieve which would thus be afforded, prayers and sacrifices could be offered the Lords of the Sun and Moon, and to Quetzalcoatl, the Feathered Serpent. In answer to these prayers, the Gods would surely send the aged people who alone were left as prospective parents, a generation of sons.

Once the priests' program of giving up some of the girls to the ape-men had been made definite, it had not taken Naida and the others long to decide that they would never submit. And then, while matters were at an acute stage, a tall, blond white man had come to the Valley of the Geyser—Kirby.

AS Naida had finished her story, Kirby mustered a smile despite the soberness which had come upon him.

"So the white man came," he repeated after her, "and all of you decided forthwith to stage your revolt."

"Why not?" Naida answered. "We observed you until we were sure you possessed the qualities of leadership we wanted. After that, we did what we could to coax you to come here."

Kirby grinned at that.

"Now," Naida ended simply, "we will go to the caciques. If they accept you, and grant our requests to them, there will be peace. If they rage, it will be war."

Suddenly she drew closer to Kirby as they swung along, and slipped her hand into his, looking up at him in silent entreaty.

"How much farther," he asked in a voice which became sharp, "until we reach the headquarters of these caciques?"

"They live in a castle which our ancestors built ages ago on a protected plateau," Naida answered tensely. "It is a good distance still, but we will cover it soon enough."

They crossed now one edge of a shadow-filled forest composed principally of immense, pallid palmlike trees. Farther on, the path wound through a belt of swampy land covered by gigantic reeds which rustled above their heads with a glassy sound, and by things which looked like the cat-tails of the upper world, but were a hundred times larger. Everywhere hovered odd little creatures like birds, but with teeth in their long snouts and small, frondlike growths on each side of their tails. About some swamp plants with very large blooms resembling passion flowers, flitted dragon flies of jeweled hues and enormous size, and under the flowers hopped strange toadlike creatures equipped with two pairs of gauzy wings.

FINALLY, through a tunnel composed of ferns a hundred feet high, they emerged to a still densely overgrown but higher country which Naida said was a part of the Rorroh forest.

In the forest, Kirby gained a hazy impression of bronzy, immense cycads and what appeared to be tree chrysophilums with gorgeous blossoms. Then he received a much clearer impression of other trees with blossoms of bright orange yellow and very thick petals, each tipped with a glassy sharp point. The disconcerting thing about the trees was that, as they approached, the scaly limbs began to tremble and wave, and suddenly lashed out as though making a human effort to snatch at the bright travelers.

Naida and all the others hurried along without offering comment, and Kirby asked no questions.

Once he thought he saw a group of gorilla creatures parallelling their course back amongst the forest growth, but if Naida observed the animals, she paid no attention. The one thing which had any effect upon the company was the appearance, presently, of two vast, birdlike creatures. As these things approached, Naida signaled to all to crouch beneath the shelter of a tall rock beside the path.

Enormous, the birds had bat wings, and carried with them, as they approached, the stink of putrid flesh. The long beaks were overfull of sharp teeth. The heads, set upon bodies of glistening white-grey, were black. Reddish grey eyes searched the jungle as the creatures flapped along. But the Pterodactyls — if they were that — passed above Naida's band without offering attack, and presently Naida

gave the command to advance again.

IN time, they came to a chasmlike gorge across which was suspended a slender long thread of a bridge. Not far above the bridge, a considerable river emptied itself into the gorge in a mirrorlike ribbon. Kirby could not hear the torrent fall—or rather could not hear it strike any solid bottom. But from somewhere in the unlighted, unfathomed depths of the abyss rose strange bubbling and whistling sounds.

At the bridge, Naida paused and pointed to the land across the river. And as Kirby looked in the direction indicated, he beheld a rocky eminence rising for several hundred feet straight up from the expanse of a level, tree and grass covered plain. Atop of the plateau, glimmered the complex towers and turrets, the crenellated walls of a castle which, in its grey antiquity, seemed as old as the race of men.

"It is behind those walls that the caciques dwell," Naida said quickly. "It is behind the castle, in a series of separate houses, that the older members of the race dwell. We shall go and look upon them presently. But first we will force an interview with the caciques."

In silence Kirby took her hand, and, with the others following, they moved out upon the swaying, perilous causeway which hung above the chasm. After that, the trip across the plain to the foot of the plateau cliffs was quickly accomplished.

Here, however, Kirby thought they must face trouble, for he found that the great walls, of a sparkling, almost glassy smoothness, shot up to a height of at least three hundred feet, and that no path of any sort was visible.

"We're here," he said, "but how can we get up?"

BUT understanding began to dawn as Naida laughed, and produced from the pouch at the side of her gauzy dress four pliable discs of a substance which resembled rubber.

"You are very strong, are you not?" she asked.

"Yes."

"Then you will have no trouble in following us up the cliff. Our Serpent God, Quetzalcoatl, taught us how to climb long ago."

With that she handed Kirby the set of vacuum discs, and producing another for herself, moistened them in a pool of water close at hand. Then, as all of the girls followed her action, she strapped them to her hands and feet, and in a moment they had begun the ascent.

"Why," Kirby said presently, "with these things you could hang by your feet and walk on a smooth ceiling!"

Naida laughed, and they worked their way upward.

When the climb was accomplished and the discs were put away, Kirby found himself standing on the outer edge of a mediaeval paradise, of a magnificent plateau partly fortified by nature, partly by the hand of man.

"Ah!" he cried in deep admiration, then followed Naida.

The building—the castle—in the near distance, resembled a castle of Spain, save that there was greater beauty and subtlety of architecture. Turreted on all four corners, constructed of material which looked like blocks of natural glass, the fairylike structure was crowned by a gigantic tower of something which resembled obsidion. Up and up this tower soared until its gleaming black tip seemed almost to touch the glassy-radiant sky of the cavern.

No people showed themselves, and Kirby saw that the bronze-studded portals set in the front of the castle were closed.

Admiringly, he glanced at the surrounding land laid out in checkerboard patches of gardens and orchards where grew a bewildering variety of unknown fruits and blooms. Butterflies drifted past, and the air was freighted with the scent of flowers. Inside a walled enclosure, Kirby saw a good-sized plot

heavily grown with the plant on which he had been subsisting. As they passed this ground, each of the girls, Naida leading, made a strange little bowing, gliding genuflection, and Kirby wondered.

NOW, however, new sights distracted him as they crossed a port drawbridge above a deep moat which was a fairyland of acquatic plants. Although not a sound had come from the castle, the great entrance doors were swinging back.

"Be ready," Naida whispered, "for almost anything. The doors are being opened by some of the palace guard. I have little doubt that word was long ago rushed to the caciques that we are come to them with an upper-world man!"

Kirby answered with a nod. Then they passed the outer doors, passed inside, and Kirby blinked at what he saw.

In a long hall decorated bewilderingly with a carven frieze in which appeared all of the symbols common to early Mexican religions, and many new ones, stood a row of bright suits of armor of the Sixteenth Century. From each suit peered the glassy face and shovel beard of a dead Conquistadore.

So this was what happened to intruders from the upper world! The Conquistadore who kept his long watch beside the geyser was not the only one! Kirby felt an involuntary chill prickle up his back. But he was not given long to think before Naida, ignoring the gruesome array, clasped his arm.

"Look! Behold!"

And Kirby saw that with almost magical silence the whole wall at the end of the corridor was sliding back to reveal an enormous amphitheatre in the center of which stood a vast circular table. Ranged in a semicircle about that table, stood fifteen incredibly ancient men clad in long, glistening grey robes. Blanched beards trailed down the front of the garments until they all but touched the floor.

The caciques!

Kirby, on the threshold of the amphitheatre, squared his shoulders and held his head high. Then with Naida on his right, his own eyes boring unyieldingly into the smouldering, narrowed eyes which stared at him, he advanced.

But in front of him the priests moved suddenly. From Naida burst a shriek. In the radiant glare of the council room flashed the long, thin, cruel blade of a sacrificial knife.

The cacique who had whipped it from his robe flew at Kirby with a condor swoop, talon-hands outstretched, his wrinkled, bearded face contorted with fury.

CHAPTER V

BEFORE Kirby was more than half set to fight, the priest was clawing at his throat, and a gnarled old fist was poised to drive the knife in a death stroke.

Kirby did the only thing he could do quickly—sprang to one side. The move saved him. The knife whipped past his shoulder, and the cacique nearly fell. But it had been a close enough squeak for all that.

Nor was it over. After Kirby the priest sprang with unexpected agility, and before Kirby could snatch at his pistol the talon-hands were lunging at his throat once more.

With the gasps of the girls ringing in his ears, Kirby bunched himself for another side leap only to find the cacique all over him like an octopus. Momentarily the knife hung above his chest, and Kirby, dismayed at the powers of his opponent, almost felt that the thing must plunge before he could break the octopus hold.

But he had no intention of being defeated, and now he was getting used to the fight. The priest's left arm swiftly clenched about his neck and shoulders, and the right arm, with the knife, attempted a drive through to the heart. Suddenly, however, Kirby lurched sideways and backward, and as the

octopus grip slackened for a flash, he himself got a wrestler's grip that left him ready to do business. As the priest broke free, he slid around in an attempt to fasten himself on Kirby's back. Quickly, tensely Kirby doubled, and knew that he had done enough. The cacique shot over his shoulders, described a somersault in midair, and landed with a sharp crack of head and shoulders against unyielding stone.

FROM the semicircle of other priests went up a gasp. From Naida came a strangled cry of joy. Kirby made one leap for the knife which had fallen from the cacique's hand as he slumped into unconsciousness, and then he straightened up with the weapon safe in his possession.

"There, you old billygoat," he croaked in English, "maybe you won't try any more fast ones for awhile."

A second later he stepped over the sprawled body to stand beside Naida.

Upon the wrinkled countenances of the remaining caciques was stamped a look of dismay and hatred which boded no good. It was plain to Kirby that in battering up the man detailed to kill him, he had committed a desecration of first order.

"Is there anyone else who cares to fight?" he flung at them in Spanish, showing a contempt as great as their rage.

The response he got was instant. From one old gullet, then from others, came choking, snarling sounds which presently became words. By those words Kirby heard himself cursed with a vituperation which made him, even in his temporary triumph, feel grave.

But he did not let that soberness trouble him long. For the main point now was that no one made a move to fight further, which was what he had expected. He had flung them the challenge, knowing that he was possessed of their knife, and suspecting that it was their only weapon. The belief that no one would care to try a barehanded conflict, no matter what insult was waiting to be avenged, seemed justified as none of the caciques advanced, and as even the cursing presently ceased.

"No?" Kirby asked. "There is to be no more fighting?"

ONE of the caciques now came forward a few steps.

"No," he answered with a lameness which was not to be denied. "But you, a criminal interloper in our realm, have been marked as a victim for sacrifice, and from this there is no power in the universe which can save you."

Kirby, after a reassuring glance at Naida, looked at the floored priest who was sitting up now, looking stupidly about, and feeling himself all over, and Kirby suppressed a grin.

"Ah, I am to be sacrificed, eh? But what happens until that time comes? Listen my Wise Ones—"

He stabbed a finger at them, and his eyes flashed.

"Listen! What you mean to say is that I have defeated you, and you must lay off me until you can launch another attack. But I have a few things to say to that. One is that I am not going to permit myself to *be* sacrificed. Another is that I demand, right here and now, that you begin to discuss with me certain agreements which are going to regulate the future conduct of affairs in this world to which I have come."

A low exclamation answered that, but it came from no priest. They remained sullen and staggered. It was Naida who murmured, and there was excitement and pleasure in her voice. Suddenly she placed her lips against Kirby's ear.

"You must not treat with them," she said. "Tell them you want to see the Duca, and will destroy them all unless he comes!"

Understanding burst over Kirby. The Duca! Then these men were only the representatives of a High Priest, the Duca!

"Yes," he repeated resolutely to the assembled greybeards, "a meeting is going to be held in this chamber of

council at once. But I will not deal with you! Do you understand me? I must see the Duca. I leave it to you to decide whether you will summon him, or force me to fight my way through to wherever he is staying."

"The Duca!"

THE words burst in dismay from the gimlet-eyed cacique who had said there would be no more fighting. He looked at Naida, well aware of the fact that it was her interference which had made Kirby extend his demand. And his look was black.

Kirby slid between Naida and the cacique.

"Yes," he spat out, "the Duca! Will you summon him, or—"

He did not repeat what he would do as an alternative. A second passed in silence. It seemed as if the cacique who had been speaking was ready to burst.

"Answer me!" Kirby thundered.

And then the priest obeyed.

"Very well," he growled in a voice which quaked with rage. "I obey. But you will wish you had never made the demand!"

The next second he swung on his heel, and leaving his company behind as a guard, headed toward a stair which led upward from one side of the amphitheatre, and which was protected by a door of heavy, grilled metal work. The stairway seemed to be spiral, and was all enclosed. Kirby realized that it must lead into the tall and beautiful tower of obsidion which he had seen outside.

"Oh," Naida whispered as looks and smiles of approval came from all of the girls, "you have been magnificent! Mark now, what we must do. You must be the one to state our terms, because you have already won a victory for us. Tell the Duca that we will not submit to any compromise with the ape-men, and least of all will we let any of our number go to the ape-men."

A deep flush crept into Kirby's cheeks at thought of what he would like to do to the man who had proposed that sacrifice.

"Then tell him," Naida continued, "that we want men brought to our world from the world above. And finally tell him we will live under his dictatorship no longer, and hereafter demand a voice in all councils affecting temporal affairs."

"All right." Kirby spoke grimly. "I'll tell him. Naida, is this high priest we're waiting for, the one who proposed sacrifice of some of you to the apes?"

Naida nodded.

NEXT moment, she, Kirby, and all the others, including the row of glowering caciques, became silent. At sounds from above, all looked toward the grilled doorway to the tower. Then Kirby realized that all of the girls, as well as the caciques, were dropping to their knees.

"No!" he commanded quickly. "Get up! You must not abase—"

He had not finished, and Naida had scarcely risen, when the heavy door swung on noiseless hinges.

The light in the amphitheatre seemed to become more intense. Then, against the great glow, Kirby beheld majesty, beheld one who represented the apotheosis of priestly rank and power.

Clad in robes of filmy material which glimmered white beside the gray robes of his underlings, the Duca wore about his waist the living flame of a girdle composed of alternate cut diamonds and blood red rubies each larger than a golf ball. And Kirby, searching for comparisons, realized that the Duca's face, upheld to others, would be as remarkable as his jewels must be when compared to ordinary gems. It was a chiseled face, seamed by a thousand wrinkles, which a god might have carved from ivory before endowing it with the flush and glow of life. A mane of snow white hair cascaded back from a tremendous forehead to fall about thin but square shoulders and mingle with the downward sweep of

pure white beard. The eyes, black as polished jet, flamed now with the glare of baleful fires.

As Naida, stealing close to Kirby, trembled, and even the abased caciques trembled, Kirby himself felt as if icy water was trickling over him.

He fought the sensation off. For suddenly he knew that in spite of first impressions which made the man seem a living god, the old Duca was human. And what was more, he was in the wrong. All of which being true, the thing to do was keep a level head and fight.

ALL at once Kirby spoke across the silence in the great room.

"I have sent for you," he said, weighing words carefully.

"And I,"—the Duca's voice was mellow and deep—"have come. But I am not here because you summoned me."

"Oh!" Kirby let sarcasm edge his words. "Well, I won't quibble about your motives for coming. Did my messenger tell you why we are here and demand your presence?"

"Your messenger," the old man said calmly, "told me."

"Very well. Do you consent to listen to Naida's and my terms? If you *will* listen—"

"But wait a moment," the Duca interrupted, still calmly, but with a look in his eyes which Kirby did not like. "Are you asking *me*, to my face, whether I will listen to terms which you offer as self-styled victor of a battle with my caciques?"

Kirby nodded. His apprehension increased.

"Ah," said the Duca softly. And then, amazingly, a smile deepened every wrinkle of his parchment face. "But do you not remember that I said I had *not* come here because you summoned me?"

"Yes," Kirby said solidly. "I remember very well."

"The thing which brought me here was the failure of my followers to accomplish an assignment which I had given them—namely, that of ending your life."

"Hum." Kirby scratched behind his ear. "You are *not* interested in arranging terms of peace, then."

"I am here,"—suddenly the Duca's voice filled the room—"to do that which my priests were unable to do. And the moment has come when the Gods will no longer trifle with you. You dog! You thieving intruder! You—"

Swiftly the Duca plunged one withered but still powerful hand into the folds of his robe above the flaming girdle. Then his hand flashed out, and in it he held—

BUT Kirby did not get to see.

A strangled cry of terror smote his ears. Naida leaped toward him from one side, while Elana, the lovely youngest girl, sprang from another direction, hurled Naida aside, and stopped in front of Kirby.

Through the glaring room flickered a tiny red serpentine creature which the Duca hurled from a crystalline tube in his hand. As the minute snake struck Elana's breast, she gave a choked cough, and then, as she half turned to smile at both Naida and Kirby over her shoulder, her eyes went blank, and she collapsed gently to the polished stones of the floor—dead.

A second later came squirming out from under her the ghastly, glimmering little snake which had struck.

Slowly, while every mortal in the room stood paralyzed, Kirby stepped forward and set his heel upon the writhing thing. When he raised his boot, the snake was only a blotch on the floor.

The Duca was standing as still as girls and caciques. The laughter with which he had started to greet what he had thought would be Kirby's extermination had faded to a look of wonder—and fear. He was an easy mark.

Up to him Kirby rolled, and with all the force of soul and muscular body, drove his fist into the Duca's face.

"By God," he roared, "you want war, and you shall have it!"

The Duca was simply out—not dead. Since Kirby did not want him dead, he did not strike again, but swung back from the sprawled body, faced Naida, and pointed to the tower door.

"Up there!" he snapped. "Seize the tower. I have a reason!"

At the Duca's crashing downfall, had come to the caciques a tension which made Kirby know they would not be dummy figures much longer. His eyes never left them.

"Quick, Naida!" he snapped again. "We must hold the tower!"

Naida, all of the girl, were staring deadly at Elana, dead.

"The tower!" she choked. "But we cannot go there. It is the Duca's!"

"Because it is the Duca's," Kirby said firmly, "is exactly why me must hold it. Come, Naida, please—"

AND then he saw comprehension begin to dawn at last.

He also saw two of the caciques glide from the wooden line, and slink toward him, past the unconscious Duca, stealthily.

As Naida suddenly cried out to her companions, pushed at two of them, and then darted like a rainbow nymph toward the silent and forbidding upward spiral of steps, Kirby faced the gliding caciques.

One he clutched with viselike hands, and lifted him. As the other shrieked and sprang, he was mowed down by the hurtling body of his fellow priest which Kirby flung forward mightily.

The rest of the caciques were howling. While Naida waited beside the tower door, the other girls flashed up the steps. The Duca still lay where he had fallen, a thread of blood oozing from his mouth. Kirby, after his last look over all, solemnly stooped and gathered in his arms the limp, radiant little body of the girl who had given her life that her friends might be left with a leader.

A moment later, he was standing on the steps. Naida, unopposed by the still stupefied caciques, swung shut the tower door and shot a double bolt.

"Naida—" Kirby whispered as he held Elana closer to him, "oh, I am so sorry that we could have won only at such a price."

As Naida stooped to kiss the pale little forehead with its halo of golden hair, sobs came. But then she raised her eyes, and they were, for Kirby, alight with the message that she could and would accept Elana's sacrifice, because she would gladly have made it herself.

"We will not forget," she whispered. "Carry her tenderly, and come."

For better, for worse, the Duca's tower was theirs.

CHAPTER VI

AT the end of an hour, Kirby was taking a turn of guard duty at the foot of the steps, while the others remained with Elana in a chamber above. To Kirby, with things thus far along, it seemed that the seizure of the tower had proved a shrewd stroke.

It seemed that the tower was to the Duca what hair was to Sampson. From Naida had come the information that the Duca lived hidden within the great shaft of obsidion, and appeared but seldom even before his caciques. Apparently a large part of his hold upon his subjects was maintained by the mystery with which he kept himself surrounded. And now his retreat was lost to him! Such had been the moral effect of the loss upon both Duca and caciques, that his whole first hour had gone by without their doing anything.

Kirby, standing just around the first turn of the winding stairway, presently cocked his ears to listen to the conclave being held in the amphitheatre.

"Why not starve them out, O Holy One?" he heard one of the caciques ask of the Duca, only to be answered by a growl of negation.

The Duca, Kirby had gathered before this, wanted to fight.

"But there is no food in the tower, is there?" the cacique still pressed on, and this time he was supported by other voices.

"No," the Duca rumbled back. "But am I to be deprived of my retreat, left here like a common dog amongst other dogs, while these accursed fiends starve slowly to death? No! I tell you, you must fight for me!"

BUT he had told them so several times before and nothing had happened. Kirby grinned at the thought of the caste the Duca was losing by being driven to this belittling parley.

"Holy One," exclaimed a new priest in answer to the urge to fight, "what can we do against the golden haired fiend? The stairs are so narrow that he could defend them alone. And then there are the gates of bronze. If we could shatter the first, at the foot of the steps, we should only encounter others. The Duca must remember that his tower was built to withstand attack."

"Even so," the Duca snapped back, "it must be attacked! I—"

But then he fell silent, having been made so by the sounds of dissension which arose amongst his caciques. Kirby, laughing to himself, turned away from his listening post, and tiptoed up the steps.

After he had closed and bolted behind him three of the bronze portals so feared by the caciques, he turned to the entrance of the chamber in which he had left Naida and the others. Here all was silent, and he found his friends grouped about a couch on which lay Elana. Feeling the solemnity of the moment, he would have taken his place quietly amongst the mourners.

Naida, however, came to him at once, and in a low voice asked for news from the amphitheatre, and when Kirby answered that the caciques were unanimously in favor of leaving them alone until they starved, she exclaimed:

"Oh, then it is good news!"

After that, however, a shadow of doubt flickered in her great eyes.

"And yet, is it? It means temporary immunity, of course. But—starvation!"

Kirby assured her with a grin.

"If we had to starve we might worry. But there is more food here than the Duca thinks. Look!"

FROM a bulging pocket of his tunic he fished a strip of the roots on which he had subsisted so comfortably. Naida's eyes widened, and several of the girls gave low cries.

"Yes," Naida exclaimed, "but such food! Why—why, do you know what you are offering us? Why, this is the sacred Peyote! Only the Duca eats it, and, at rare intervals, his priests."

Kirby was really startled now.

"But surely you and the others have taken quantities of the stuff away from the Valley of the Geyser. Do you mean—"

"Because we gathered the Peyote does not mean that we have ever tasted it. We gather it for the Duca. To taste would be complete, utter sacrilege. Have *you* been eating it?"

Inwardly Kirby was chuckling at this added proof of the buncumbe with which the Duca—and other Ducas—had fooled all.

"Of course I've been eating the Peyote."

"And—and nothing has happened to you?" Naida asked.

"Hardly. I certainly haven't been blasted by the Lords of the Sun and Moon, or the Serpent either!"

Naida and all the others were silent. The conflict between their reverence for the food and their clear desire to eat it, now that it was become the food of their leader, was pathetic.

Kirby put one of the strips in Naida's hand.

"Why not?" he asked. "We have bested the Duca in fair fight. We have seized his tower. Why not eat his food?"

As he had hoped it would, the suggestion at last settled the matter. A moment later, as Naida nibbled her first bite, she smiled.

"Why, it—it's good!"

With the question of provisions settled at least for a time, Kirby's next thought was of the tower. The present lull of peace seemed made for exploration.

"Come along," he said to Naida, we've plenty to do," and then, when he explained, they set out, accompanied by Nini, a cousin of Naida's, and Ivana, a younger sister.

All of the others remained with little Elana.

WHILE they climbed spiral stairs, Naida explained that the chamber they had just left was used by the Duca as a place in which he prayed before and after contacts with caciques or subjects. A sort of halfway station between earth and heaven, as it were, where the Duca might be purged of any sullying influence gained from human relationships.

At thought of the rank, egotistical hypocrisy implied by the story, Kirby smiled grimly. Then they came to a new door, heavier than that which barricaded the prayer chamber. Unlocked, the thing swung ponderously at Kirbys push, and with the three girls pressing close beside him, he entered—and stopped.

"Naida!" he gasped.

"Oh, *oh!*" she cried, and while Nini and Ivana gasped, she clapped her hands in an instinctive, feminine reaction of joy. "But there are things here which I believe none but the Ducas of our race have ever seen! Oh! Why, the sacred girdle is as nothing compared to this display!"

By "display" she meant a treasure which took Kirby's breath away, which made his heart act queerly.

The walls of the chamber were fashioned of polished blocks of obsidion on which stood out in heavy bas-relief a maze of decorative figures fashioned of pure, beaten gold—the same kind of gold which had gone into the making of the cylinder of gold. With his first glance at he gorgeously wrought motifs of Feathered Serpent and Sun and Moon symbols, Kirby knew to a certainty whence the golden cylinder had come originally.

But even the gold—literally tons of it there must have been—was nothing compared to the gems.

THEY were spread out in blinding array upon a great table in the center of the room. There were pearls as big as turkey eggs and whiter, softer than the light of a June morning growing in the East. There were rubies. One amongst the many was the size of a baseball and glowed like the heart of a red star. The least of the two or three hundred gems would have outclassed the greatest treasures of the Crown jewels of England and Russia combined.

Most overwhelming of all, however, was the jewel which rested against a square of black cloth all its own in the center of the table. While his heart still acted queerly, while Naida, Nini, and Ivana hung back, delighted, but still too bewildered to move, Kirby advanced and took gingerly in his hands a single white diamond about eighteen inches long, and almost as wide and deep as it was long.

The thing was carved with exquisite cunning to a likeness of the living head of Quetzalcoatl, the Feathered Serpent.

Kirby dared not guess how many pounds the carven hunk of flashing, blue-white carbon weighed. He knew only that like it there was no other diamond in the world, and that the thing was real. Naida and the two girls were silent now, and suddenly Kirby realized that to their awe of the gem was added awe of deepest religious nature. Slowly he put the diamond head of the Serpent back upon its square of cloth.

"We—we had heard that this thing

existed," Naida said presently, voice hushed, "but no one except the holy men of our race has ever beheld it."

"But what is it?" Kirby asked. "Whence came it?"

However, when Naida would have answered, he interrupted.

"But wait! Tell me as we go. We could stay here for the rest of our lives without much trouble, but we've got to cover the rest of the tower and get back to the others."

IT was after they had closed the door to the treasure room that Naida told her the story.

"There is not so much to tell," she began. "The diamond itself is so gorgeous that it is hard to talk about. But here is the story. A great many ages ago one of the Ducas of our race found the diamond, decided to carve it into a perfect likeness of the head of the Serpent God. All of the craftsmen of the race helped him, and when they were done, they took their image to Quetzalcoatl himself, and showed him what they had done.

"Quetzalcoatl was pleased. So pleased, that he promised all of the wise men that he would cease to prey upon them as he had in the past, and henceforward would take his toll of sacrifice from the ape-men alone. Them he hated and would continue to hate because they worshipped not him but Xlotli.

"And so it came about," Naida went on slowly, looking up at Kirby as they still mounted wide steps to the upper reaches of the tower, "that our people gained immunity from a God which had always before harmed and destroyed them. Our race presently began to build this castle here on the high plateau, and Quetzalcoatl kept his compact with them. He still comes out of his chasm at intervals and preys upon the ape-men, but no one of our race has seen him for thousands of years, and he has always let us alone. And there is the whole myth and explanation of why the great diamond is revered among us as a holy of holies."

THEY had mounted to a new door which Kirby guessed might give entrance to the Duca's living quarters. But he was in no mood to open it at once.

"Wait a minute," he said as they all paused. "You say that, although none of your race has seen Quetzalcoatl since the diamond head was carved, he still comes out of his chasm and makes trouble for the ape-men. Just what does that mean?"

"Why—" Naida looked at him wonderingly. "I mean what I have said. The Serpent comes out of his chasm and—"

"What chasm?" Kirby asked sharply.

"Why, the one we crossed this morning. It extends to the far reaches of our country, beyond the Rorroh forest, where the ape-men dwell but which our people never visit. It is in that distant part of the chasm that the Serpent dwells."

"But—but— Oh, good Lord!" Kirby whistled softly. "Naida, do you mean to tell me that Quetzalcoatl was not simply a mythical monster, but an actual, living serpent which is alive *now?*"

Naida and the others shrugged.

"Why not?" she answered. "Sometimes we have captured a few ape-men, and they tell us stories of how Quetzalcoatl kills them. *They* say he is very much alive."

"But," Kirby mumbled in increasing wonder, "is this living creature the same which your ancestors worshipped first as long ago, perhaps, as a million years?"

"That," Naida answered unhesitatingly, "I'm not sure of. Our caciques believe that the Serpent, although it lives longer than any other sentient thing, finally dies and is succeeded by a new Serpent which is reproduced by itself, within it own body."

So overwhelming did Kirby find this unexpected sequel to their discovery of the great diamond head, so stag-

gered was he by the fact that Quetzalcoatl, of Aztecan myth, might exist as a sentient creature here in this cavern world, that he had little heart left for exploring other wonders.

NEVERTHELESS, he presently pushed open the new door before which they had paused, and behind it found, as he had expected, the Duca's living quarters.

These were as severe as the jewel chamber had been gorgeous. A thin pallet spread upon a frame of wood formed the bed, and beside it stood a single stiff chair. That was all. The walls of glistening obsidian were bare.

There was, however, a door in one circular wall, and as Kirby flung this open, his previous disappointment changed to delight. For shelves along the walls of the small chamber held roll after roll of parchment covered with script. And in one corner lay six undamaged, almost new Mannlichers and several hundred rounds of ammunition!

"Naida," he exclaimed, "do you know what those are?"

"I suppose that they are weapons of the sort you used against the ape-men this morning?"

Kirby grinned.

"They are the same kind I used, and then some. With these weapons we can do what we never could with the smaller one. How did they get here?"

"They came when I was much younger," Naida answered with a shade of sadness in her voice. "The men who had them penetrated the Valley of the Geyser, coming by a different route from the one you followed. When the Duca learned they were there, he sent such men of the race as were still able to fight to kill them. That order of the Duca's was one of the first things to turn me against him. The men were not harming us, and they should have been permitted to go away. But the Duca insisted that they be killed, and in the fight were lost eight of our youngest and strongest men."

KIRBY stooped to inspect the rifles.

"Has no one learned to use these weapons?"

"No," Naida answered. "The Duca kept them for himself."

"We think," put in Ivana, "that he hoped to learn to use them, and was afraid for us to have the knowledge."

Kirby filled one of the magazines, and felt the heft of the gun with pleasure.

"Very well," he said. "It looks to me as though your time to learn the art of shooting has come at last. Come, I think we had better be getting back downstairs."

Kirby took three guns himself, and with the others lugging the rest, they started back. The parchment rolls, he decided, must be left for examination later on.

They were all elated when they rejoined the girls in the prayer chamber, and high spirits were still further increased by the report, promptly given, that all had remained quiet in the amphitheatre. Save only for the presence of Elana, radiant and calm in death, the give and take of questions would have been accompanied by actual gaiety.

But the time of peace did not last much longer. While Naida was in the midst of answering incessant questions about the wonders of the jewel chamber, Kirby heard a sound from below, and suddenly went over to the downward-winding steps.

"Listen," he called sharply back to the others.

He had not been mistaken. Many footsteps echoed from the amphitheatre, and he made out that the caciques were coming toward the bolted gate at the foot of the steps. While he listened, and Naida came eagerly to his side, silence fell.

But then clear words came up to them.

"Let the upper-world man come to the foot of the steps," called the Duca. "I have an offer to make him!"

CHAPTER VII

TO himself Kirby chuckled. Such real entreaty filled the Duca's voice that there seemed no danger of further treachery from him at the moment.

With a grin, Kirby took Naida's hand and led her down the steps, unbolting each bronze gate but the last.

"What do you want?" he asked in a cool voice a moment later, when he stopped on the final step and faced the Duca from behind the protection of the final gate.

Clearly the parley was going to be a blunt one.

"I want you to leave our world," the Duca rumbled promptly.

He was drawn up in a posture intended to display dignity. But his left cheek, where Kirby had hammered him, was pulpy and discolored, and somehow he seemed to Kirby more than ever merely human.

"Under what conditions am I to leave?"

"If you will vacate my tower at once," the Duca said with a flush of eagerness which he could not conceal, "I will permit Naida and one of my caciques to escort you back to the Valley of the Geyser. I will also give you directions by which you may travel in safety from there to the outer world."

Kirby, wanting more details, made himself seem thoughtful.

"And what will happen to me, and to the girls, if I decline?"

Encouraged, the Duca made an impressive gesture.

"You will be left in the tower to die of starvation. Mine is not a complicated offer. It should require no complicated decision. What is your answer."

Kirby dropped his carefully assumed mask of thought.

"My answer is this," he lashed out. "I will not leave! The tower is ours, and we will hold it until you have accepted Naida's peace terms on your priestly oath!"

"But if you stay in the tower you will starve!" thundered the Duca.

"No, we won't starve! We won't starve because we eat the food of Ducas!"

IN silence, Kirby took from his pocket a strip of the sacred Peyote and bit off one end of it. Suddenly the hush in the amphitheatre became complete. As he watched Kirby chewing, the Duca gasped and choked.

"Moreover," Kirby announced with slow emphasis, I have taken possession of the weapons which you took from men of the upper world, and which have already sent men of your race to their death. I have no wish to kill either you or your caciques, but if you do not presently discuss peace with me, you will certainly find yourself embroiled in a struggle more bitter than the mild one of this morning."

With that said, he swung on his heel, and taking Naida's hand again, started with her up the steps.

"I have nothing more to say," he called over his shoulder to a Duca whose white haired majesty had been stripped from him.

"We're getting on," he whispered to Naida a moment later. "The best thing for us is just to sit still now, and wait."

With the questions he wanted to ask Naida about her world becoming insistent, he found himself, as a matter of fact, glad for the prospect of further respite. As both of them rejoined the girls in the Duca's prayer chamber, the first thing he did was to take from his tunic the cylinder of gold which he had found in the canyon.

"What is this, Naida?" he asked, hoping to start talk that would make all of them forget the Duca and politics, and at the same time help him to learn much that he wished to know.

But a queer thing happened. Naida's reaction to the carven gold was as unexpected as it was marked.

"Oh!" she cried in a voice which suddenly trembled with surprise, with blank dismay. Somehow, the cylinder

of gold brought to her face things which not even the Serpent's head of the diamond had evoked.

THE prospect of a long session of talk began to fade out in Kirby's mind.

"But Naida, whatever is there about this fragment of gold to startle you as it does?"

By this time all of the thirty-odd other girls had come flocking about them, and all were staring at the cylinder as fascinatedly as Naida.

"Do you see what he has there?" Naida finally asked, ignoring Kirby in her continued excitement.

"Do we *see?*" answered the girl she had addressed. "Naida, surely it is the carving which was lost!"

Naida was quivering with feeling now.

"Do you realize what it means to our cause that it should have been returned to us in this way?"

The girl to whom she had spoken, and the others, simply looked at her, but in one face after another presently dawned awe and joy.

Kirby stood still, puzzled and interested, until at last Naida was recovered enough to speak to him.

"Where did you get this thing which you call 'a fragment of gold'?" she asked in a hushed voice.

"I found it," Kirby answered, "lying beside the skeleton of an upper-world man, while I was ascending the canyon which brought me to the Valley of the Geyser."

"And you do not know what the cylinder is? But no, of course you could not."

"*What* is it, Naida?"

NAIDA glanced at her friends, then laid her hand on Kirby's.

"Next to the great diamond, it is the most cherished possession of our race. In some respects it is even more holy than the Serpent's head. The cylinder happens to be the first work in gold which was ever produced by our people. It was made when the race was new. It was because our first wise men had found they could create things of beauty like this cylinder, that they decided to attempt the creation of the Serpent's head, which is supposed to have brought all of our blessings upon us."

Kirby thought he was beginning to understand the excitement which his introduction of the cylinder had created. He also thought he could see what Naida had meant by implying that the cylinder could be made to aid their cause.

"Tell me," he asked in a mood approaching reverence, "how the cylinder came to be lying beside a dead man's bones."

"It was stolen," Naida answered in the breathless silence which the others were keeping. "When I was very young, an upper-world man found his way here, and the Duca captured and meant to sacrifice him. But while they were leading him to the temple where such special ceremonies are held—the building stands on another plateau, beyond this—the man broke away. Some of the priests in the procession were carrying the cylinder, for it was an occasion of great importance. The prisoner knocked them down, got the cylinder away from them, and finally escaped by the same route over which you came."

"And he escaped," said Kirby wonderingly, "only to be killed by a rattlesnake before he ever reached the civilized world. But do you mean that you never knew your sacred cylinder was so close to you all these years?"

Naida shook her head.

"We never got to the canyon of which you speak, for a special reason which I shall explain some day. And besides that, I think the Duca was afraid of this man who fought so bravely. So he counted the cylinder as lost. And that is one of the reasons why he killed the men with the rifles, who appeared in the Valley a few years later."

KIRBY looked at her thoughtfully. The mood for discussing all the wonders of this lower world, which had made him bring out the cylinder originally, had quite vanished.

"I suppose," he said, "that anyone who was responsible for the return of the cylinder to its rightful owners, would be held in some respect?"

Naida nodded vigorously, while little lightnings of excitement flickered in her eyes.

"He might be held in more than respect."

"What, then, do you suggest that we do next?"

Again the small lightnings darted, and Naida reached for the cylinder.

"Do you mind if I take it for a moment?"

"Of course not."

Promptly then she faced around.

"Wait here, everyone," she ordered.

And with that she waved the cylinder in a flashing little arc before their eyes, and darted to the door.

It was all so unexpected that she was gone before Kirby could speak. Slowly, with all of the suddenly gay company of girls following after him, he went to the doorway, and stood on the steps leading to the amphitheatre.

A MINUTE passed. He heard voices downstairs. He heard Naida's voice ringing clearly, though he could not distinguish her words. He heard a great cry from a score of male throats. More minutes passed. Words that were low and tense poured out in a rumbling volume. Above the rumble, Naida's voice presently sounded again, clear and sweet, but incisive. Then, when no more than five or six minutes had gone, Kirby heard the clang of the bronze gate at the foot of the steps, heard light, swift footsteps ascending.

"Naida!" he called softly.

She flashed upward toward him around the last curve in the stairway. Straight to his outstretched arms she went.

"It is done! It is done!" she whispered.

"Tell us!" cried first one girl and then others.

Naida drew away from Kirby at last.

"I told the Duca," she said to all of them, "that our leader would keep the cylinder for a period of time equal to one upper-world years. If the Duca grants all the terms of peace which we will ask of him, and if he accepts the upper-world man as our temporal ruler, and all goes well for a year, then we will consider replacing the cylinder where it belongs."

"And what," Kirby asked exultantly, "does the Duca say?"

Suddenly, without warning, Naida dropped before him on one knee, and from that position gazed up at him laughing.

"He says he will make you our King, to govern all temporal affairs within our realm! He is waiting for you to come and hold a conclave now."

"What?"

Still kneeling half in fun, half in sincere reverence, Naida held out the precious, potent cylinder of gold.

"Guard it carefully!" she exclaimed. "So long as you keep it away from the Duca, making him hope to win it back, he will consent to almost anything. Yes, he is waiting with the caciques in the amphitheatre now; waiting to draw up terms of peace."

CHAPTER VIII

TO be King amongst these people! A queer sensation tugged at Kirby's heart as he descended the steps with Naida at his right, and all of her —and his—dainty and gracious friends following after. Yet, intense as his emotion was, never for a second was he able to doubt the evidence of his senses which told him that all of this was real. As they descended the black steps of the tower, Naida's sweetness, her grace, the warm humanity of her, made him humble with gratitude for the extraordinary fortune which had

come to him, an unromantic aviator born in Kansas.

Then they were standing in the brilliant light of the amphitheatre, and the Duca, surrounded by his caciques, was advancing to meet them.

It was not a long conference which followed. Kirby saw from the start that the Duca was indeed ready to come to terms. So treasured an object, it seemed, was the cylinder of gold, that the mere fact that Kirby possessed it made the Duca respect the possessor, whether he would or no. With this initial advantage, it did not take long to make demands and win acceptance.

It was agreed that some systematic campaign of extermination should be planned and carried out against the ape-men. Further, the project for eventually bringing other upper-world men to the realm was accepted. Most notable of all, it was agreed that while the Duca should retain a voice in the regulation of temporal affairs, Kirby should possess an absolute veto over his word.

Naida said there must be some formal ceremony to celebrate Kirby's ascendency to power. To this the Duca consented, and established the date as a fortnight hence, and the place as the temple on the plateau beyond the plateau of the castle, where the Ducas had been invested with their robes of state from time immemorial. At the end, it was decided that little Elana should be left in the prayer chamber until a burial ceremony could be held on the morrow.

IN less than an hour, Kirby, Naida, and the others withdrew from the amphitheatre to return to the regular dwelling places of the girls. Deep in his mind, Kirby did not know how sincere the Duca was, and fear lingered, somehow, but he put it aside for the present.

As they came out of the castle, proceeding in a gay procession across the drawbridge above the moat of beautiful aquatic plants, Kirby saw that the light from the glass sky was fading to a glow like that of spring twilight in the upper world. Naida answered his question about the phenomenon by saying that day and night in the cavern corresponded to the same periods above. What quality of the glass sky gave out light, she did not know, but it seemed definite that the element was sensitive to the presence of light in the upper world, and when the sun sank there, the glow faded here.

A flower embroidered path led them around the castle to a group of little crystalline houses all overgrown with bougainvillea vines and honeysuckle. In front of the first, Naida paused, and while the others went on to the other houses, she looked at Kirby.

"It is Elana's dwelling," she said simply, "and it will be vacant now. Elana would want you to take it. Will you, please?"

The twilight was deepening swiftly. Kirby nodded reverently, then drew close to Naida.

"Naida?"

"Yes?"

He took her hand.

"I can stay here, I can consent to become, after a fashion, a King, only if you will reign with me as Queen. Will you, Naida? Will you love me as I have learned to love you during this single day in Paradise?"

She did not answer. But presently Kirby's mind went blank for sheer joy. For then Naida raised her face, and he kissed her lips.

It made no difference then that, despite the day's victory, Kirby could see trouble ahead, and feared, rather than rejoiced at, the Duca's too easy acceptance of terms. The future could take care of itself. This moment in the dusk belonged to him and Naida.

THE two weeks which passed for Kirby after that particular twilight sped quickly. During the first morning, all attended the ceremony which was held for Elana's burial in the plot of gardened ground where lay

her ancestors. Ensuing mornings were devoted to conferences in the amphitheatre with Duca and caciques.

After the fourth day Kirby, at Naida's insistence, moved into splendid quarters in the castle—a suite of chambers across the amphitheatre from those in which the caciques dwelt. In practically forcing the move on Kirby, Naida won his consent finally by agreeing to have their wedding ceremony performed on the day of his coronation; then she would come to the castle with him.

The afternoons of that first fortnight before the wedding and coronation were spent in hunting and fishing. Also Kirby and Naida visited often the aged people of the race, who dwelt in crystalline, vine covered houses like those of the girls, but removed from them. Naida's relatives were dead, but she had relatives there, and to all these aged ones, who sat living in the past, she did what she could to explain present developments in the affairs of the younger generation.

Last but not least, Kirby set aside certain hours each afternoon which he devoted to the formation of a rifle squad amongst the girls. Six rifles he had, and in turn he trained each of the girls in their use, having set up a range at the foot of the plateau cliffs. The results he gained made him feel that the day would come soon enough when he would dare launch an offensive against the ape-people; and especially pleasing was the sense of power over the Duca which he gained. The Duca showed no sign of treachery. Yet Kirby did not trust him. Never did he quite forget the misgivings which had lingered in his mind after the first conclave.

AS for his relationship with Naida, that grew with every moment they could steal to spend with each other. And side by side with their growing knowledge of each other grew, for Kirby, an increasing store of knowledge of the realm.

He learned, amongst other things, what seemed the origin of the worship of the Serpent, Quetzalcoatl, amongst primitive Mexican races. The time had been when the People of the Temple had mingled freely with the races above them; and, that they might have ready means of egress to the world, they had built the tunnel through which Kirby had entered the Valley of the Geyser. Thus, going and coming as they did, they had spread their cult of the worship of Quetzalcoatl; and when, eventually, strife arose between the peoples of upper world and lower, and the People of the Temple withdrew to their realm, they left behind them the Serpent myth which was to live through countless centuries.

The tunnel, Naida said, had been abandoned when her people left the upper world once and for all, and its use for any reason prohibited. This, Naida gave as the reason why none of them went near the tunnel now, and why the cylinder of gold had lain in the canyon undiscovered. It was the explanation she had promised on the day in the tower, when first she saw the cylinder.

So the days passed, until the day set aside for wedding and coronation dawned. On that morning, Kirby, having concluded a long conference with the Duca, was walking with Naida in the gardens outside the castle.

"Tell me," he said to her: "do you yourself believe that this Serpent has the powers of a God?"

Naida looked at him quickly, a sudden fright in her eyes.

"I believe the Serpent exists to-day, somewhere in the distant reaches of the chasm, beyond the Rorroh forest."

"Yes, but do you believe the Serpent is God?"

ACTUALLY frightened now, she looked swiftly about. But when she saw that they were alone, confidence returned.

"No!" she exclaimed. "I do not believe Quetzalcoatl is a god. I believe

he is the most terrible creature anywhere in our realm, and that men first worshipped him through fear. I believe our race would be better a hundred times if they had never made him their God."

Kirby whistled.

"Then you do *not* believe that the Ducas of past ages talked with him. You do not believe it was Quetzalcoatl's pleasure over the great diamond which made him cease preying on your people?"

"No! Long habit makes me show respect for these myths, and adhere to the customs of our cult, but I do not believe. I think our race gained immunity for the Serpent's ravages, not through a compact with Quetzalcoatl, but because our builders were intelligent enough to erect the castle up here on the plateau, where Quetzalcoatl could not reach them. To tell the truth, I think the whole cult is false and wrong, and I wish Quetzalcoatl were dead and gone from the world!"

Kirby smiled. In spite of Naida's reverence for certain features of the cult, he had long suspected that her true feelings were those she had just expressed. And he was glad for this new bond of understanding between them. He glanced at her with understanding and perfect trust.

"Naida, since we have talked so frankly, there is one more thing which I must bring out."

She looked up at him.

"What is it?"

"The Duca."

SHE drew closer, her perfumed body brushing his, her great eyes caressing him.

"Naida, I am afraid of the man."

"And so am I!" she confessed suddenly.

"It has all been to easy," Kirby said in a slow voice. "There is no doubt whatever that our possession of the cylinder of gold has had great influence on the Duca, and yet—"

He paused, taking her hand.

"And yet," she went on for him, "you do not believe he would have conceded what he has, unless he intends to make trouble?"

Kirby nodded twice, emphatically.

"Well, you have trained all of us to use the rifles."

He smiled gravely at her understanding.

"Yes, I have. And your skill, and that of the others, with the rifles, will always help us. Yet even so—"

Closer still she drew now, and there was sadness in her eyes.

"I think I see," she said in a voice which choked. "When do you think he will make a move to start trouble?"

Kirby hesitated, then drew a long breath.

"To-day!"

"On—on the day of our union?" Naida echoed in dismay. "Can you tell where or how he will strike at us?"

Kirby shook his head.

"There are a hundred things he could do. Naida, I—I— Well, somehow I am afraid of the ceremony this afternoon—the wedding ceremony!"

HE felt a little shiver go through her, and would have taken her in his arms, save that a gay cry rang in the garden then.

"Naida, Naida!" It was her cousin, Nini, a bronze-haired youngster as elfin and Pucklike as her name. "I thought we should never find you! Do you realize this is your *wedding* day, and that you're acting as if there was nothing to be done?"

Nini darted a mocking glance at Kirby, who grinned.

"Do come, Naida!" cried another girl. "Your gown is ready, and we want you to ourselves for awhile."

Other girls joined them, some singing and some carrying an obligato on the sweet, flutelike instruments which Kirby had first heard as he hung in the throat of the geyser. In front of them all, Kirby laughed and kissed Naida on the forehead. But as he took leave of her thus, he whispered:

"We must not let our guard relax for a second this afternoon. And I think there is a more definite precaution which I will take, besides."

CHAPTER IX

SOME hours later, Kirby smiled with tight-lipped satisfaction at thought of that precaution which he had taken. What it was only he, Nini, Ivana, and three other girls knew, which secrecy pleased him as much as the precautionary measure itself.

Seated alone in a dimly-lighted, thick-walled cell of the ancient temple in which the dual ceremony of wedding and coronation would take place, he was waiting for the moment when the festivities would begin. Thus far the Duca had done nothing. Yet Kirby's uneasiness would not leave him, and he continued to be thankful that, if trouble should start, the Duca might not find as many trumps in his hand as he expected.

A couple of hours after Kirby had left Naida and the other girls in the garden, all had begun the two-mile journey from the castle to the small plateau on which stood this temple, where the ceremony would be held. Now, while Kirby waited alone, the Duca and his caciques had gone to another wing of the temple. Naida, attended by her bridesmaids, had been assigned to a cell of their own, and the rest of the girls were waiting in the nave of the temple. Unable to attend the walk from their plateau to this, the old people of the race had remained in their crystal houses.

With ten minutes more to wait, Kirby rose from a bench on which he had been seated, and began to pace his cell. It was this archaic pile of stone, he finally decided, which was causing his depression. Unlike the bright and cheerful castle, this place, older than any other building in the realm, was squat, thick-walled, and gloomy. Here, in the dusky cells which lined labyrinthine corridors, the early generations of the race had found protection from outside dangers. All of which was all right, Kirby thought, but just the same he wished he had insisted upon being wedded in the brilliant and cheerful amphitheatre.

BUT presently he stopped pacing and faced the door of his cell. Then he breathed a sigh of relief.

From down the twisting corridors which wound out to the central nave, stole the high sweetness of soprano voices, the whisper of flutes, and the mellow resonance of little gongs of jade and gold. It was the signal for which he had waited.

It had been the Duca's instructions that he should come out into the temple when the music began, and meet Naida there. Both would advance to the altar, and when they were in place, the Duca would come to them. Kirby, therefore, after a glance at the blue trousers and tunic of tanager scarlet which the girls had made for him, opened the door of his cell, and stepped out.

In a moment he traversed the windings of the corridor, and halted under a flat arch at one side of the temple nave.

As he paused so, to await the appearance of Naida and her bridesmaids under a similar arch directly across the temple, he held his breath. Not even nymphs could be as graceful as were the twenty-six girls who were performing the dance of Life Immortal, which tradition decreed should be given before the ceremony by which, in this realm, two souls were wedded. The flash of rainbow gowns was like the swirling of light in a sky at dawning. The music of voices, flutes, and the little gongs of jade, would have stirred the souls of the dead.

If only the confounded sense of approaching disaster would leave him, Kirby thought grimly, this would be a magnificent moment. As it was, he turned his eyes away from the girls, and began to examine the temple.

Just as Naida had told him the case would be, he found both sides of the nave surrounded by arches similar to the one under which he was standing. Everywhere, dim and tortuous corridors led to cells like the one he had just left. Then, in one end of the nave, loomed a closed door from behind which the Duca and caciques would appear when the couple to be wedded were in place, before the altar.

The altar itself, a rectangular mass of some jadelike stone, stood at a distance of perhaps twenty paces in front of the closed door. On top of the greenish stones, resting on a cushion of some crimson material, flashed the crown which would be used at the coronation. Kirby's eyes widened as he beheld a single rose-cut diamond two inches in diameter, mounted in an exquisitely simple bandeau of wrought gold. But, a moment later, even the crown which would be his—if nothing happened—seemed only a bauble compared to the other prize which he had won in this world beneath the world.

Naida!

HE realized that the dance was ended, the music stilled, and that the rainbow garbed girls had formed a double line in the center of the temple. Suddenly his heart beat fast, and for just a moment, as he dared look full and deeply at Naida, and she smiled back at him across the distance, he even forgot to be depressed.

But even as he advanced to meet her, his uneasiness returned.

Now the girls were singing again, their voices raised in a triumphant chorale as beautiful as Naida's face with its warm red lips and smiling eyes, as beautiful as her wedding gown that might have been woven, in its filminess, of mist from the sea. The bridesmaids, silent, their lovely faces alight, paused. But Naida came on.

From her floated to Kirby a fragrance more overwhelming than even the perfume of the geyser. Presently he felt her hand on his arm, and at last they stood side by side. Now again, his premonition of evil left him for a flash; but again it returned.

"I love you," he whispered.

"I love *you*."

"But I am still afraid."

Naida's smile faded.

"And I, too. Oh, I've been terribly afraid! We will keep our guard!"

"Yes."

IN front of them, on the altar, the crown diamond winked and shimmered in a dim light. The swelling chorus of triumph, in which the bridesmaids had joined now, made the whole temple ring. Slowly, while Naida moved easily beside him, Kirby began to march to the altar.

Then it was done, and they were halted. After both of them had given a lingering glance at the crown whose diamond shimmered now within their reach, they raised their eyes to the closed door behind the altar.

The thing was swinging open. An inch it moved, two inches.

Kirby waited, never taking his eyes away from the widening crack. With a crashing final volume of sound, the chorus swept magnificently to its climax. Then the door was flung wide.

Still Kirby stood stiffly before the altar, with Naida drawn up splendidly beside him. After two seconds, however, he moved.

Duca and caciques were not standing in the corridor.

In the semi-darkness, the only figures visible there were squatting, grotesque things whose bodies were covered with whitish hair and whose leathery faces were disfigured by gashes of mouths filled with enormous teeth.

A feeling of standing face to face with final disaster, turned Kirby sick. As he jerked back from the altar, sweeping a paralyzed Naida with him, the ape-men let out gibbering howls, half-human. With gigantic, hopping strides, the foremost rank of the creatures swung forward, straight into the temple.

CHAPTER X

KIRBY, already falling back toward the other girls, caught Naida up in his arms, and ran.

"Nini!" he bellowed. "Ivana! Get the rifles!"

While the two whom he had ordered sprang to a corridor, and four others followed, Kirby fell in with the others and dropped Naida on her feet. Sick as he was, there was still a ray of hope, because the hard-headed precaution he had taken against treachery this morning was to have Nini and Ivana bring the rifles here and hide them.

The first of the ape-men, snarling, laughing, had hopped beyond the altar, and the yellow foam of madness was slavering from his jaws. Over his shoulder he howled some jargon which made his hairy legion struggle to catch up with him.

"Have you got any puff balls?" Kirby snapped at Naida.

She shook her head numbly, just as Nini and Ivana swung forward with the Mannlichers.

"No. But you had sense enough to bring the rifles! Oh, what does it mean?"

"The Duca has sold himself out to the ape-man! He was helpless against us, and has brought them to destroy us for him. Here, Ivana, give me a rifle! Everyone for herself!"

The next moment he had a Mannlicher at his shoulder.

AS the thing kicked, an ape who would have reached him in two more jumps crashed over with his heart torn out, the temple echoed with sound which threatened to rip its solid walls apart, and bright flashes at Kirby's right and left told him that other rifles were getting under way.

He fired again, twice more, slaughtering an ape with each shot. The five other rifles were creating havoc.

Blocked by a dozen torn and bleeding bodies on the floor, the reenforcements which still poured from the corridor, began to mill around amongst themselves, and the forward charge slowed down. All the panic which had sent the ape-men scuttling from the beach at their first experience of gunfire, seemed ready to break loose again now.

Kirby felt it was good enough for the work of a minute.

"Get into line as I showed you how!" he shouted. "Rifles in the front rank, the others behind them We're all right now! Keep firing!"

"Keep behind me!" he ordered Naida, still unarmed.

Then he placed a shell in the chest of one brute who was broader and heavier than the others—a leader—and saw that he had increased the demoralization; and from the hastily formed front rank a volley leaped hot and jagged.

Then the rout which had threatened broke loose. As eight ape-men slumped into blubbering, bleeding heaps, the milling remainder of the horde turned, and in a fighting, scrambling frenzy attempted to get back to the corridor.

Kirby let his triumph take the form of thoughts about what he would do to the Duca when that personage could be rounded up.

"Follow after them!" he ordered. Don't stop until we have located the Duca. He is the one we must settle—"

BUT he never finished.

As he himself, holding fire for a second, prepared to follow up the retreat, he found himself confronted by the utterly unexpected.

A voice unquestionably the Duca's began to shout orders at the ape-men from somewhere down the corridor! And, riot or no riot, the tones of that voice seemed to inspire the creatures with more fear than the rifle fire.

So suddenly the change came, that by the time Kirby flung his rifle again to his shoulder, the crazy retreat had been halted, and as he fired again, the ape-men swung in their tracks and began to charge!

There was no time to guess by what power the Duca had turned the tables. There was not even time for orders. Kirby fired twice, knowing that the ape-men had been infused with some spirit which would bring them on in spite of rifle fire.

Naida, unarmed, cried out behind him, and he shoved his gun at her.

"Take it!"

He had just inserted a new clip. He handed her others.

"Fire for your lives!" he shouted to the girls.

"But you!" Naida gasped. "You are unarmed!"

"I'll be all right."

On the floor lay a jagged, hand-chipped knife of obsidion which had fallen as some ape died. Kirby grabbed it.

IN another second the flood of ape-men had burst in all its fury over him. Crashing, thundering shots were dinning in his ears, animal death screams and the Valkyrie battle cries of the girls filled the temple. He could not tell how many of the apes were fighting him. As a cave-man's club whizzed past his head, he drove his knife once, and yanked it dripping from hairy, yielding flesh to plunge it again. A sudden side-step carried him away from another assailant. He dropped the knife to snatch the gigantic club of one of the creatures he had killed.

Quicker in every movement than the ape-men, he laid on, right and left, with such power that blood spurted in a dozen places, and heads were split open on every side. And because of his speed, the frantic, clumsy blows and knife thrusts which were directed at him proved harmless.

A terrific drive which smashed a snarling face into pulp, left Kirby free for a second, and he emerged from the first round of battle ready to cut in and help the girls. But then he saw that he had gotten separated from the main body.

"Naida!" he called. "Naida!"

A series of shots answered him, and as several apes fell, a gap was opened through which he saw her conducting a well ordered retreat of all the girls toward the dark corridors surrounding the temple. Again Kirby fell to with his club, swinging, hacking, fighting with his whole strength to catch up. He made headway, and hope began to come again. The ape-men would not kill, or even harm, the girls. What they wanted was to carry them off. If he and Naida together could get their party rounded up in the corridors, the chances were good.

"Naida!" he shouted again. "Coming!"

Battering down an ape in front of him, he jumped up on the corpse, and saw that already the vanguard of girls had reached the first sheltering corridor. Naida had been cut off from the others by eight or ten apes. But even so her fire made her mistress of the situation, and she seemed all right.

It was just as Kirby started to jump down from the corpse that he saw something which put another complexion on the matter, and left him frozen where he was.

BEHIND Naida, directly in the path in which her slavering aggressors were slowly forcing her, a huge stone slab in the temple floor had begun to tilt up as if it were a trap-door raised by an invisible hand. Within the yawning opening, Kirby caught a glimpse of stone steps winding down into blackness.

In a flash he saw that it was Naida, and her alone, that the ape-men were after. The Duca's determination was to capture her, and it was the presence of this trapdoor, making capture possible, which had brought on the second charge of the apes.

A scream, high and wild, from Naida released Kirby from his trance of horror. He leaped off the corpse, and smashed a suddenly presented skull like an egg shell. Momentarily he saw

Naida, too terrified to fire, staring at the open trapdoor. Kirby felled two apes and felt their blood on his arms.

"Ivana!" he yelled. "Help Naida, for God's sake!"

An answering shout, not from Ivana alone but from many girls, encouraged him, and he swung his club with a speed and force which would let nothing stand before him. But then another scream from Naida rang in his ears.

"Naida!" he shouted. "It's all right! We're coming!"

He knew, though, that it *wasn't* all right. Fighting like a maniac, he opened another lane down which he glimpsed her. Fighting still, in a last terrific effort to force his way down the lane to her side, he saw the black opening gape at her feet; and, as Naida screamed again, a dozen hairy arms reached it at once, twisted the empty rifle out of her hands, and lifted her shining body as if it had been a feather.

Shouts and murderous fire were coming from the other girls, and Kirby swung his club as never before. But even as he fell upon the last two or three apes which kept him away from Naida, those who had snatched her, bolted down the steps.

Kirby was left with the memory of Naida's great eyes fixed upon his, fear-filled, beseeching his protection. In a second, the ponderous trapdoor crashed into place, and she was gone.

CHAPTER XI

DAZED and grief-stricken, Kirby stood in the bloody, corpse-filled nave of the temple, surrounded by thirty-two girls whose faces were blanched and most of whose eyes were tear-bright. The fight was over, and they were assembled to decide what must be done, but for a time no one spoke.

Gaining the trapdoor just as it was pinioned from beneath, Kirby had torn at it with bare hands. But that had been hopeless. Then he had begun to fight again. But that had been hopeless also. With howls and screams they started to retreat, and it had not taken Kirby long to find out that every part of their raid had been carefully planned, even to this retreat under fire. Straight into the damp black tunnel which led away from the corridor behind the altar, the ape-men had leaped. And Kirby, in hot pursuit, had heard the Duca's voice driving them on. Too much the soldier to follow in that darkness where the Duca knew every foot of the way, and he knew nothing, Kirby had seen that he must go back to the girls and take stock.

Now he looked at the strewn ape corpses, smelled the corrosive reek of burned powder, and tried to put aside his grief.

"The Duca," he said at last, "must have been planning this with the apes ever since the first morning in the castle."

Ivana, Naida's sister, nodded.

"The Duca brought the ape-people here, kept them in the tunnel, and then herded them back when their work was done. I suppose it was one of the caciques who opened the door when the time was right."

"Does anyone think we ought to try the tunnels now?" Kirby asked.

SEVERAL girls shook their heads. He knew that already they felt he had been wise in giving up the pursuit. Ivana spoke.

"If the Duca and his horde stay underground, we shouldn't have a chance against them. And if they don't, we're better here."

Kirby shot a searching glance at her, somehow sure that her thoughts were running parallel with his.

"You don't think they're going to stay here, do you?"

"No, and you don't either," Ivana answered.

"It seems to me that they will retreat into the Rorroh as fast as they can," Kirby then observed.

"And do you think the Duca and all the caciques will go with the apes?" This time it was Nini who spoke, and with the council so well launched, Kirby began to feel better.

"I think," he answered Nini, "that the Duca has gone over to Xlotli altogether. We fooled him to-day. Instead of killing or capturing us all, he—he only got Naida. But he won't give up. I think he is taking the apes off to some place from which he can launch a new attack. And we've got to stop him before he is ready to deliver another blow."

"What do you mean?" Ivana now asked.

"Do you know where the villages of the ape-people are?"

"Yes. None of us has been very far into the Rorroh, but I could guess where some of the villages may stand."

SILENCE fell after that, but Kirby knew from the glint in Ivana's eyes, and the quick breaths which other girls drew, that they understood.

"Ivana," he said suddenly, "will you go with me into the Rorroh jungle, and stay with me, facing down every danger it may conceal, until we have found Naida and brought her back?"

A flush of life crept into Ivana's pallid cheeks.

"Yes!"

Kirby faced the other girls, all of them keyed up now.

"Nini, will you go?"

Nini, bronze-haired, dainty nymph of a girl, who had yet the stamina of a man, looked at him with brave eyes. Then her hands tightened on her rifle, and she stepped forward.

"When will you have us start?" Ivana asked in a low voice.

"Now!" Kirby answered, and, taking up the rifle which lay beside him—the same with which Naida had fought—he looked at the other girls.

"There is not one of you," he said slowly, "who would not go willingly on this quest. But the pursuit party must be small and mobile. And there is another duty. To all of you I leave the care of the castle and the plateau. Take the three rifles I shall leave behind, do what you can to reassure the old people, and hold the plateau safe until we return."

A murmur of girls' voices sounded in the temple. Kirby motioned to Nini and Ivana, and followed by a low cheer, they moved off together.

THE night was on them, where they crouched in a cave above a swiftly flowing river. Kirby, rifle across his knees, sat peering out across the black, invisible stretches of the forest. His nostrils quivered to this mingled smells of fresh growth and fetid decay of the grotesque land. In his ears shrilled the creaking and scraping of insects, the flap of unseen wings, the distant bellowing grunt of some unseen, unknown animal.

"I cannot sleep," Ivana said presently, from back in the cave.

"Hush," he whispered, "you will wake Nini."

"But I am already awake!" came her answer. "I—I cannot forget the white snakes which slid from that tree when you tried to cut firewood."

"Hush," Kirby murmured again. "Presently the moon will rise on the earth above, and light will come here. Even if the jungle is terrible, were you not born with courage? Go to sleep now, both of you, because you must relieve me soon."

As silence fell again, he knew that the real thing behind their nervousness was their ghastly doubt about what the night was bringing to Naida. But none of them spoke of Naida. So sickening were the possibilities that Kirby would not permit conjecture to occupy even his mind when, at length, the sound of even breathing told him that Nini and Ivana slept.

After dreary passing of an hour, a faint light grew over the jungle, silver and clear, and Kirby let his mind run back to the two deserted ape-men communities which they had found and

searched before dusk sent them to the cave. From the signs of hasty departure, it looked as though a far-reaching order had taken the brutes away from their dwellings, and sent them—somewhere.

That somewhere seemed likely to be the great central community which Ivana said was rumored to exist in the far reaches of the Rorroh. The problem was how to locate the community through the hideous country. But Kirby presently drove the question from his head. To-morrow's evils could best be faced when morrow dawned.

ENOUGH light had grown now so that the swirling bosom of the river, and a strip of sand directly below the cliff in which their cave was set, were visible. As Kirby let his eyes wander to the lush growth beyond the sand, he heard something which made him stir uneasily. Some creature which suggested power and hugeness immeasurable was moving there.

The brush parted, and he saw plainly an animal with the bulk of a two-story house. On two feet the nightmare thing stood, as lightly as a cat, and then came down on all four feet as it ambled out on the sand and extended into the lapping river a tremendous beak studded with teeth. A smell of crushed weeds and the musty odor like that of a lion house filled the night. The tyranosaur—it was more like a tyranosaur than anything else—breathed heavily and guzzled in great mouthfuls of water.

Kirby sat perfectly still. He hoped the thing would go away. But the tyranosaur did not go away. All at once it hissed loudly and stood up, its eyes glowing green and baleful, and Kirby leaned forward.

From the water was slithering another creature with a gigantic, quivering, jelly body. Kirby saw to his horror that, in addition to four short legs with webbed, claw-tipped feet, there sprouted from the body a number of octopus tentacles. From the scabrous mottle of the head, cruel, unintelligent, bestial eyes glared at the rearing tyranosaur.

ONE of the serpentine tentacles whipped out, slapped against the tyranosaur's fore-shoulder to call forth a hiss and a short bellow. Then other tentacles waved in the moonlight, and in a flash the tyranosaur was enmeshed as by a score of slimy cables. He was not altogether helpless. Suddenly the steam shovel of a beak buried itself in the jelly body of the water animal, and there spurted out a flood of inky liquid. The water animal emitted a sickening gurgle. But the tyranosaur's advantage was only temporary. Closer and closer drew the ugly, scabrous tentacles. The tyranosaur never had a chance. Its green eyes flared, the shovel beak plunged and slashed, but never for a second did the tentacles relax. As Kirby stared, he saw the water animal begin to back up, dragging its gigantic enemy with it. For a second the whole night was hideous with the sound of hisses, gurgles, dashing water. Then the river boiled once and for all, and both animals sank in its depths.

Kirby chafed cold hands together and shivered a little, then turned to see if Nini and Ivana had heard the struggle.

Fortunately, however, they still slept. And as if this peace which was upon them were an omen of good, the jungle continued quiet for the next hour. Kirby wakened them at last, and after a snatched nap, was in turn awakened.

The three of them started again when the first glimmerings of dawn came to the forest. Of food there was plenty—fruits which grew in profusion, and some roots which Nini grubbed out of the earth. Having started along the first trail which they encountered beside the river bank, they ate as they walked.

KIRBY judged they had kept their steady gait for more than two hours before a slight widening of the trail roused him from the preoccupation into which he had fallen.

"See there," he exclaimed to both girls, and pointed at a grove of trees with fanlike leaves which towered up to the right of the trail. "What are those big bundles fastened to the lower limbs?"

Ivana glanced at Nini, who nodded as if in answer to a question.

"This must be one of the places where the ape-people leave their dead," Nini answered. "The bundles— But come over to them."

Kirby forced his way ahead until he stood beneath a huge, unsavory bundle wrapped in roughly woven brown fibre, and wedged in a fork between two limbs. Judging from the ugly odor which overhung the grove, there could be no question about what the bundle contained. Nini and Ivana, glancing at the scores of similar bundles which burdened the trees of the whole grove, made wry faces. Kirby slung his rifle in the crook of his arm, and nodded toward the trail.

"There must be a village somewhere near," he said.

A mile farther on they found what they were seeking, a colony of seventy or eighty conical dwellings of mud and thatch, which were ranged in a double circle about a central common of bare, well-trodden earth. It took no long reconnaissance to discover that the town was deserted completely of all inhabitants.

Ivana beckoned and darted to one of the nearest huts, and Kirby, following her, found lying on the uneven earth floor within, a half-skinned animal which resembled a small antelope. An obsidion knife beside the carcass, the disordered condition of a couch of grass, the sour odor of recent animal occupancy, all told their story.

"The owner left in a hurry," Kirby observed aloud.

Nini, who had gone beyond, to a larger hut which might have belonged to a king ape, called out excitedly to them.

"A great number of apes have eaten a hurried meal here!"

KIRBY entered the shadowed, foul-smelling interior of the central hut to find her statement true. Broken meats, some raw, some cooked, lay on the dirt floor, and scattered bits of fruit were mingled with them. The ashes of a burned out fire at the hut entrance were cold, but had not been for long.

"Do you think—" Ivana began.

"I think the whole of the Duca's horde came this way, fed, and went on, taking everyone with them," Kirby finished.

"But which direction did they take?" asked Nini, who was standing at the door of the big hut and had already begun to examine the crowding, green, inscrutable walls of jungle which foamed up to the clearing on all sides.

No less than seven trails wound away into the dark country beyond, and Kirby saw that the question would not be an easy one.

Having hastily circled the clearing and peered down one trail after another without finding a clue, he knew that it was the Duca's intelligence which had made the ape-people depart without leaving even tracks behind them. He did not like the situation.

"Well," he rumbled to his companions, "we may as well take our choice. One chance in seven of coming out right!"

But the words were hardly out of his mouth before he pulled himself up with a jerk, and cursed himself for having given in.

"Ivana! Nini!" Sharpness, a sudden ring of hope edged his voice. "Am I seeing things, or is that—"

AS he pointed to a huge aloe bush down one of the trails to their left, they started to run. Then Kirby knew that he was not seeing things. What his first inspection of the trails had failed to show, he saw plainly now.

Tied loosely to one branch of the aloe bush, almost concealed amidst the deep green of foliage, was a bit of white cloth! In a second Kirby was holding

out to his companions a tiny strip of Naida's wedding gown.

"She knew we would come!" He stared down the trail with narrowed, keen eyes.

How Naida had contrived to leave her signal was more than they knew. The fact that she *had* done so, sent all three of them down the trail at driving speed.

An hour passed, then another, and the morning which had been barely born when they first took the trail, wore on to the sultriness and vast, colored light of a tropical noon. Twice the main trail forked, and twice they found an unobtrusive bit of cloth to guide them beyond the works. When the hands of Kirby's still useful watch pointed to twelve, they paused to eat and rest. Then they pushed on.

Meanwhile, the country through which they passed left Kirby with a clear understanding of why Naida and her people had shunned the Rorroh forest down the centuries of time.

Just one thing which stuck in his head was the sight of a small creature like a marmoset, sticking an inquisitive nose into the heart of a sickly-sweet plant which resembled a terrestrial nepenthe. No sooner had the little pink snout touched the green and maroon splotched petals, than the plant writhed, closed its leaves, and swallowed the monkey whole. Little squeaks of agony and terror sounded for a moment, and ceased.

AT midafternoon they paused in a spot where a forest of trees with whorled tops were slowly being strangled to death by immense orchids of every conceivable shape and color, and by a kind of creeping mistletoe which grew almost as they watched. Here also, the ground was covered with fluffy, grey-green moss which seethed constantly as if it were a carpet of maggots. Both Ivana and Nini warned Kirby on his life not to touch or go near the moss, and a moment later he knew why.

From the forest came the flash of a small, five-toed horse being pursued by some animal with a hyena head that barked. At the edge of the mossy glade the hyena swerved aside, but the terrified horse plunged straight out on the carpet of moss. Instantly the air was filled with the sound of animal screams, and a series of tiny, muffled explosions. A cloud of greenish-red mist swirled about the horse. Quivering, still screaming, the animal went down on its knees, and as the reddish green smoke fell on him and settled, it became a mass of growing moss spores.

Before Kirby's eyes, the pitful animal was covered by a shroud of green that spread over him and cloaked him, licking over all with tiny sounds like far off muffled drums as fresh spore cases developed and burst. The screams died. Even as Kirby drew the girls to him and they passed on, the horse's nostrils, eyes, mouth were filled with choking green moss, and he lay still.

ON and on, deeper into the jungle Kirby pushed, and never for a moment did his companions falter. But the way was not so easy now, for nerves were jaded, muscles sore, and no human will could have been powerful enough to cast aside the growing fear for Naida.

Fear came finally to a head when, toward dusk, Kirby sighted a fork ahead of them, approached it confidently to look for Naida's sign, and found nothing.

"Oh Lord!" he muttered, and realized that it was the first time any of them had spoken for long.

"There must be something to guide us!" Ivana exclaimed as she searched with questing eyes through the swiftly deepening gloom of evening.

Nini, making an effort to keep up hope in spite of the paleness which came to her lovely face, darted down both paths, glancing as she went at every bush and shrub. But she returned in a moment, and as she shook

her head, her great eyes were somber.

Kirby grunted, scratched behind his ear. Then, however, he stifled an exclamation, and clutched at the hands of both girls.

On one of the two trails appeared suddenly in the dusk an ape-creature. Kirby saw at once that the thing was small—a female undoubtedly—and that it had spied them and was moving toward them with all speed. And borne in upon him most certainly was the fact that the ape-woman was making signals of peace. In her outstretched hand flickered through the gloom a strip of cloth that was gauzy and white.

Again—a strip of Naida's gown.

"If you know any words of her tongue, call to her," Kirby said sharply.

IVANA obeyed. All three of them started forward. The ape-woman, after returning the hail in creaking gutterals, came up to them, and with an unexpected look of pathos and entreaty in her face, began to address the girls with a flood of talk.

Word after creaking word she poured out while Nini and Ivana listened in silence. Finally Kirby could stand the suspense no longer.

"What is it, Ivana? What does she say? Your eyes are lighting up with hope! Tell me—"

Ivana smiled and turned toward him, while the ape-woman still looked her entreaty.

"She says," Ivana announced bluntly, "that she and the other women amongst their people, do not want any of the girls of our race to be taken by their males. Already the men are quarreling about Naida. They will not look at their own women. Naida told this woman that we would be following, and sent her to lead us to the place where the ape-people are assembling!"

Kirby felt his lips tightening in a grim smile at the thought that jealousy was not unknown even to the semi-human creatures of this neither world. He looked at Nini and Ivana during a stretched out second. Then he moved.

"Good," he snapped. "We go on at once."

That was his only recognition of what was surely one of the important happenings of a lifetime. But for all that, his tired brain, which so lately had felt the chill of black depression, was suddenly set on fire with triumph and thanksgiving.

CHAPTER XII

AS they marched rapidly, the ape-woman, who called herself Gori, succeeded in making them understand that most of the ape-tribes, commanded by the Duca and his caciques, were assembled in the central community toward which they were heading, that grave danger of some sort threatened Naida, and that the need for haste was great. But what the danger was, the two girls could not understand.

"We can't make out what is going to happen—what they plan to do tonight," Ivana whispered at last to Kirby. "All Gori says is that we must rescue Naida and take her away, and must take the Duca away so that he cannot influence the men any more. And she keeps repeating that we must hurry."

"And you can't find out what we must rescue Naida *from?*"

Ivana shook her head.

"I'm afraid we're facing something of an appaling nature, as dangerous to ourselves as to Naida. But I know nothing more."

By the time the silver glow which corresponded to moonlight flooded the jungle, Gori had left the open trail, and was leading them across country which humans could not have negotiated without the guidance she offered. Advancing cautiously always, she stopped for long seconds at a time to reconnoitre, shifting her huge ears about and changing their shape, twitching her nostrils, and glancing hither and thither with bright little eyes. Sometimes they passed immense spike-tipped flowers ten feet in diameter,

with fleshy yellow leaves which gave out a nauseating stench. Vines with long, recurved thorns and blossoms of deep scarlet, laced the undergrowth together and made passing dangerous. Fire-flies drifted past, and all above and about them flapped moths as big as bats.

Kirby, his clothes almost torn from his body, sweat pouring from every pore, heard the labored breathing of the girls, and wondered how they could hang on. But they did, and after a long time, Gori, halting in the midst of a slight clearing, held up a warning hand.

A QUEER sensation came over Kirby. As he stared and listened, he realized that the twinkles he saw far ahead were not fire-flies, as he had thought, but lights. In the frosted moon glow, Nini and Ivana drew close, and Kirby clasped their hands and pressed them for a second. Too tired to exult further he was, even though they seemed close to their goal of goals.

Gori swung her hairy arm in a signal, and with rifles clasped carefully, they began to advance. When, five minutes later, they stood in the heart of a rank glade beyond which they could see nothing, Gori spoke to the two girls in her creaking whisper, and Nini laid a restraining hand on Kirby's.

"We have gone as far as Gori dares! She says we must climb a tree here, and watch what will go on in a clearing just beyond this thicket."

"And we still don't know what we're getting into," Kirby muttered."

But at any rate they had reached the end of their march.

Exultation did come to Kirby now, but still he was too completely fagged, as were both girls, to give much sign. Gori pointed to a tree some fifty feet away, which shot up to a great, foliage-crowned height. They moved toward it, and in a moment were climbing, Gori first, the girls after her, and Kirby last.

"Here we are," Ivana presently whispered, at the same time drawing herself out on a limb just beneath one on which Gori and Nini had crawled.

Kirby found himself hedged in by tasselated leaves through which he could not see. The foliage thinned, however, and soon Ivana halted, perched herself in a comfortable position. Kirby, making himself at ease beside her, and seeing that Nini and Gori were in place, turned his eyes slowly, expectantly downward.

AT first, all that he saw from his bird's-eye perch, was a circular clearing two hundred yards across, which was surrounded on all sides by lowering jungle. In the exact center of the circle, like a splotch of ink on gray paper, there gaped a deep hole which might have measured six feet in diameter. Around this hole, eight poles as tall and stout as telephone poles stood up in bristling array. The moonlight showed that the whitish earth of the clearing was tamped smooth as though thousands of creatures had danced or walked about there for centuries. But not a living form was visible.

A grunt of disappointment escaped Kirby after that one look. When he looked beyond the clearing, however, a change came to his feelings.

A quarter of a mile away, lights were twinkling — the same ones which had been visible on the last stretch of the journey. And the moonlight touched the little conical roofs of fully two hundred huts of the ape-people. No sound was audible save the soughing of night wind in the trees, the shrilling of insects. Nevertheless, there stole over Kirby all at once a feeling that the great ape-village was crowded to overflowing. What was more, he felt himself touched by an eery sensation—familiar these days—of evil to come.

Ivana, seated with her rifle across her knees, stirred on the limb beside him.

"Oh," she whispered suddenly, "I am afraid of this place!"

Kirby took her hand.

"I know. Maybe it is the sensation of all the legions of the apes herded together so silently in their village. I wish we knew what to expect from them. I wish—"

BUT he broke off, and called softly to Nini on the limb above. She looked down with a drawn expression about her mouth.

"Are you all right?" Kirby whispered.

"Yes. But— Well, are both of *you* all right? Gori says we have reached here in time, but I—" A gasp of uneasiness escaped her, and Kirby heard Ivana echo it. "There is something about that black, silent hole out there in the clearing, and about those poles sticking up like fangs, that makes me terribly, terribly afraid. Oh, what are they planning? Where is Naida? What are they going to do to her?"

Kirby whistled in a low key. He had not thought about the black hole in the clearing.

"Hum," he muttered, "that's interesting. Ivana, Nini, what do you suppose—"

But he got no answer. Gori's twitching lips grimaced them to silence.

The next instant, the stillness of the night was hurled aside by a howling, gurgling shout from a hundred, a thousand hysterically distended ape throats. With the sickening sound came from the village the sullen roaring of drums.

TEN minutes later, a Kirby who was cold with apprehension and wonder looked down from his leaf-crowned height at such a spectacle as he knew human eyes had never before seen. The shouting had died away, the drums were silenced. Crammed into the clearing, their foul, hairy bodies packed close together, the silver light glinting against rolling red eyes and grinning white teeth, stood fully a thousand apes!

Once the first tumult of shouting in the village had died, they had come on in silence, and in orderly procession. Those who bore the drums—huge gourds with heads of stretched skin—had formed a line entirely around the outer diameter of the circular clearing. Then others, lugging vats of a dark, heady-smelling liquor, had deposited their burden beside the drums, and formed a second circle. The balance of the thousand had crowded itself together as best it might, leaving bare the center of the clearing with its black hole and fangs of poles. Kirby, down at those legions, did not wonder that cold sweat wetted his back.

Capable of thinking about only one thing—Naida—he was trying with all his strength not to think. Ivana, her face blanched in the light which filtered their camouflage of leaves, sat rigid, her hands locked about her cold rifle. On the branch above, Nini and Gori were as still as mummies. No one had spoken since the vanguard of apes had appeared.

But at last Nini leaned close to Kirby.

"Have you any idea of what all this means?"

A draught of hot night air carried up a stench of drunkenness, and the goaty odor of massed animal bodies.

"No," Kirby whispered. "I suppose, from Gori's having brought us here, that Naida is going to appear somehow. We've simply got to trust that Gori knows what she is about."

"But listen—" Ivana suppressed a shudder. "Suppose they should bring Naida here presently to force her to take part in some ceremony at which we can only guess. Gori, who thinks we can work miracles, supposes we can rescue Naida. But I—I'm not so certain. Is there *anything* we can do?"

IT was exactly that question which had made Kirby fight to keep himself from thinking. His face turned gray before he answered. But answer he did, finally.

"Yes, there is one thing we can do, Ivana. We've got to be frank with

each other, and, so far, this is the *only* thing I've been able to figure out. If Naida is brought here, and they make any move to harm her or torture her, we can, and we will, shoot her quickly, before harm or pain comes."

A grim silence settled once more. During the last miles of march in the jungle, there had persisted in Kirby's heart the hope that there would be at least *something* favorable in whatever situation they might encounter. His spirits were so low now that he dared not speak again.

Amongst the noiseless sea of ape-men below them came, every now and again, a little ripple of motion as some anthropoid shadow fell out of his place, approached the liquor vats, and swilled down the black brew, a quart at a gulp. But mostly there was little commotion. Ivana drew a sibilant breath and said that she wished something would happen.

"I wish," Kirby answered tensely, "that we knew *what* is going to happen."

But the nightmare waiting was not to go on forever. Kirby leaned forward and pointed.

It was only instinct that had made him know action must come. For a second, no change in the expression of the ape-men, no movement in their crammed ranks, was visible. Then, however, a queer, subdued grunting rumbled deep down in many throats, and those who had faced the hundred-foot space in the center of the clearing, squatted down on their hams.

In the back of the crowd necks were craned. The stronger shoved the weaker in an effort to get a better view of the cleared stage, and a few ape-men who had been drinking, hurried on unsteady legs to their places.

"The drums!" Kirby whispered then.

WITH almost military precision, the scores of leather-faced creatures who had led the procession into the clearing, clasped the skin-headed gourds to their shaggy bellies, and stood with free arm raised as though awaiting a signal. Nini moved in her position, and Kirby felt Ivana shiver and edge close to him.

From the front rank of the crowd, there sprang up a great male creature with the face of a gargoyle and the body of a jungle giant. Just once he reeled on his feet, as though black alcohol had befuddled him, then he steadied himself, flung both arms above his head, and rolled out a command which burst upon Kirby's ears like thunder.

It was as if the whole cavern of the lower world, and the whole of the round earth itself, had been rocked uneasily, dreadfully by the bellowing, crashing explosion of the drums. Maddened by the turmoil he had let loose, the gargoyle-faced giant ape-man leered about him with blood-shot, drunken eyes, and beat on his cicatrized chest with massive fists. Suddenly he let out a bellow. Straight up into the air he sprang in a wild leap. When he came down, he was dancing, and the portentious, the sickeningly mysterious ceremony for which such solemn preparation had been made, was begun.

Kirby drew a rasping breath. Knowing that there must be some definite reason for the dance having begun just when and as it had, he looked beyond the solitary dancing giant, on beyond the crowded legions of the apes, toward the village. There, where the main trail from the community approached the clearing, he saw precisely the thing which he had both hoped desperately and dreaded terribly to find.

HEADED directly toward the clearing, moving down the trail with slow, majestic pace, came a procession headed by a bodyguard of ape-men and augmented by other men whose nakedness was covered by unmistakable, unforgetable priestly robes of gray.

All at once the ape-people in the clearing began to scuffle apart, open-

ing a lane down which the procession might pass to the central stage with its dancer, its ink spot orifice, and its fangs of tall poles. Kirby, watching the congregation, watching the majestic approach of gray robes through the night, wiped away from his forehead a sweat of fear.

"I think," Nini called in a voice pitched high to outsound the drums, "that the—the Duca is with them!"

"Yes." Kirby pointed jerkily. "In the middle of the procession, there, surrounded by his caciques!"

The Duca!

Yet his approach did not hold Kirby. Directly behind the priests were emerging now from the jungle a new company of ape-men. Squinting his eyes, Kirby saw that two of them were lugging on a pole across their shoulders a curious burden—a sort of monstrous bird cage of barked withes. Crouched on the floor of the cage in a little motionless, white heap—

But Kirby closed his eyes. Ivana, cowering against him, gulped as though she were going to be sick. Nini leaned down from above and looked at them with dilated eyes. Although none of them spoke, all knew that they had found Naida at last.

Kirby was the first to pull himself up. Opening his eyes, he stared long at the white gowned, motionless shape within the cage. Next summing up the whole situation—the cage surrounded by an armed band, the clearing crammed with a thousand ape-men—he shook his head. Afterward, he made a quick movement with his hands.

Ivana, seeing that movement, seeing the expression on his face, started out of her daze.

"No! No! Oh, there must be some other way out for her! There must—"

HER cry, half a shriek, did not change Kirby's look. What he had done with his hands was to throw a shell into the chamber of his rifle. Now he held the rifle grimly, ready to carry it to his shoulder.

The procession with the bodyguard of ape-men at its head, the renegade Duca and his caciques following next, and the cage bringing up the rear, advanced relentlessly down the lane to the central stage. The gargoyle-faced ape-man who held the stage alone danced with increasing wildness, writhing, twisting, with weird suppleness. Upon the dancing giant the procession bore down, and before him it finally halted.

The halt left the Duca and the king ape facing each other, and the ape ended his dance. After each had given a salute made by raising their arms, both Duca and the king ape turned to face the creatures who were standing with the cage slung across their shoulders. Whereupon the bearers of the cage advanced with it until they stood between two of the tall poles. There, facing the ominous hole in the center of the clearing, with a pole on either side of them, the ape-men lowered the cage to the ground.

Kirby felt his last hope and courage ebbing. Now he noticed that each pole was equipped with a rope which passed through a hole near its top, like a thread through the eye of a needle. And while he stared at the dangling ropes, the ape-men made one end of each fast to a ring in the top of the cage. The next instant they leaped back, and began to heave at the other end of the lines.

From the drums came a quicker pounding, a more head-splitting volume of thunder. Over all the ape-people who watched the show, passed a shiver of what seemed to be whole-souled, ecstatic satisfaction. Slowly, as the two ape-men heaved hard, the cage swung off the ground, and slowly rose higher and higher into the moonlit air.

WHEN finally the thing hung high above the heads of the multitude, swaying midway between its tall supports, the ape-men who had done the hoisting fastened their lines

to cleats on the poles. Then they turned to the Duca and the giant king who stood behind them, executed a queer, lumbering bow, and fell back to the rear.

The next moment it seemed as though every creature in the clearing —men and those who were only half men—had gone crazy. The king flung himself into the air as if he were a mass of bounding rubber. Following hie lead, the whole assembly let out howls that drowned even the drums, and then began to sway, to squirm, to leap, even as their king was doing before them.

The caciques and the Duca joined in the madness of foul dancing as heartily as any there. Their eyes were flaming, their long robes flapping, their beards streaming.

On his perch in the tree Kirby muttered an oath which was lost, swept away like a breath, in the shrieking turmoil of sound. Then he turned to Ivana.

"They've brought Naida here to sacrifice her."

"But *why?*" Ivana's sweet face was frozen in lines of horror. "I've been able to guess what was going to happen to her. But—*sacrifice*. Why will it be that?"

"Don't you see?" Looking up to include Nini, Kirby found his hands quivering against his rifle. "It is easy to understand. In the temple yesterday, what the Duca hoped to do was to kidnap most, or all, of the girls for the ape-people. But he was able to get only Naida. The first result was that the ape-men started to quarrel over the one girl. From what Gori says, trouble started on all sides at once. It became inadvisable to let Naida live. So the Duca, in his shrewdness, planned a sacrifice. By sacrificing Naida, he rids himself of a source of contention amongst the ape-men. He also hopes his act will win favor from his Gods, and make them help him when he is ready to launch a new attempt to capture *all* the girls."

IVANA and Nini looked at each other, then at Kirby, and horror was etched deeper into their faces.

"I think," gulped Ivana, "that you—are right. I—begin to understand."

Nini leaned close to them.

"Tell us, then, *how* this sacrifice is to be made."

Silent at that, Kirby presently made a heavy gesture toward the maelstrom of howling, leaping animals below them.

"I couldn't guess at first. Now I think I can. They have placed her in that cage and swung it high above the black hole you were afraid of. What can that mean except that she is to be offered to—to—"

It was a monstrous theory which had stunned his hope and courage, and to voice the thing in words was too gruesome.

His bare suggestion, however, made Ivana pass a hand limply over her forehead and look at him with blank, stricken eyes. Nini tottered so uncertainly that Gori, who had remained motionless and silent throughout, had to steady her with muscular arms. If it was impossible for Kirby to utter his fears aloud, he had no need to speak to make them understood.

"And—and we can do nothing?" Nini choked at last.

"You can see for yourself how she is surrounded. If we had been able to get here sooner, we might have done something. Now—"

Kirby's voice trailed off, and he gave an agonized look at his rifle.

THE terrific dance in the clearing was going forward with madness which increased second by second. It had been a general debauch at first, with the whole thousand of the apes bellowing and squirming. Now a change was becoming apparent. Red eyes which had caught the glare of ultimate madness, focused upon the caciques, the Duca, and the great king, all of whom were swaying together on the central stage. As they looked,

the horde of ape-men broke loose with a heightened frenzy of noise and movement too overwhelming for Kirby to follow. He leaned forward, making an effort to see what actions of Duca and king could be so influencing the congregation. And then he saw.

Both of those central figures, the one with hair-covered giant's body and evilly grimacing face, the other with white robes and whipping silver hair, were definitely emulating the motions of a serpent!

It was as if the angles and joints had disappeared from their bodies. They were become gliding lengths of muscle as swift, as loathsome in their supple dartings and coilings as any snake lashing across the expanses of primeval jungle. Lost in what they did, unconscious of the nightmare, demoniac legion before which they danced, they had eyes only for the empty, ominous hole beneath Naida's cage. As they circled the hole, drawing ever and ever closer to it, they opened and closed their arms with the motion of great serpent jaws biting and striking.

"God in Heaven!" Kirby cried in a voice which shrilled with horror and then broke.

It was not alone the Duca's dance which had wrung the shout from him. As Nina and Ivana shrieked and cowered, as Gori twitched, gasped, buried her head in trembling arms, Kirby knew that Naida was fully aware of what was going on—had been, perhaps, from the beginning.

Slowly, numbly she raised herself from her huddled position, rose to her knees, and clutching with despairing hands at the sides of her cage, looked out from between the bars.

THE king and Duca edged closer to the hole until they were dancing upon its very brink. From that position, they stared down into the depths, their faces tense and strained. And then their look became radiant, exalted, joyous. Suddenly the Duca leaped back. He shrieked something at the gargoyle ape, and they flung their arms high in a commanding, mighty signal which was directed across the nightmare legion of ape-men, to the drums.

As Kirby winced in expectancy, the drums ceased to roar. Over the night smashed a hideous concussion of silence, deafening, absolute. And the ape-men—all of them—and the Duca, his caciques, and the king, ceased to dance. As if a whirlwind had hurled them, the caciques scattered in all directions. The Duca, having already leaped back from the gaping orifice, suddenly turned and ran with blurred speed over to the slobbering, deadly still front rank of the congregation. An instant later the king crouched down beside him, and the whole stage was left bare and deserted.

Kirby gave one look at Naida, found her staring down, deeper and deeper down, into the hole which yawned beneath her so blackly. Then Kirby lowered his eyes until he, too, stared at the opening.

Amidst the pressing silence there stole from the earth an uneasy sound as of some immense thing waking and stirring. Came a hissing note as of escaping steam. The tribes of the ape-men waited in silent rapture. Kirby saw Naida still looking down, and felt Ivana crouch against him, fainting. He held his rifle tighter, and continued to stare.

Something red, like two small flames, licked up above the edge of the pit. Then Kirby gasped and all but went limp. Up and out into the moonlight slid a glistening white lump that moved from side to side and licked at the night with flickering black and red tipped forked tongue.

The glistening white lump was the head of Quetzalcoatl, buried God of the People of the Temple. It was wider and bigger than an elephant's, and the round snake body could not have been encircled by a man's two arms. Kirby guessed at the probable

length of the Serpent in terms of hundreds of feet.

SICK, numb, he glanced at Naida, who was still staring silently, and hitched his rifle half up to his shoulder. But he did not look down the sights yet. Although it was time, and more than time, that he fired, he would not do it until the last possible second, when nothing else remained.

Slowly from the hole slid a fifteen or twenty-foot column of the body, and Quetzalcoatl, thus reared, looked about him with a pair of eyes immense and not like snake's eyes, but heavily lidded and lashed; eyes that stared in a wise, evil way; eyes glittering and round and black as ink. After a time the mouth opened in a silent snarl, showing great white fangs and recurved simitars of teeth. The head was snow white, leperous in its scabby, scaly roughness, with here and there a patch of what looked like greenish fungus. From the rounded body trailed a short, unnatural, sickening growth of—feathers. Old and evil and very wise the Feathered Serpent seemed as his forked tongue flickered in and out and he stared at the ape horde, who stared back silently.

He seemed in no hurry to devote his attention to the cage set forth for his delectation. The black eyes rolled beneath their lashes, staring now at the Duca in his robes, and again at the huddled ape-people. But after ghastly seconds, Quetzalcoatl at last had seen enough.

Agan the moonlight glinted against simitar teeth as the great, white, puffy mouth yawned in its silent snarl. Quetzalcoatl reared his head a little higher, slid further from his hole, and then looked up at the dangling cage of barked withes.

In Kirby's mind stirred cloudily a remembrance of moments in the past: the feel of Naida's first kiss, her look as they advanced to the altar in the temple. Then he saw things as they were now, with Naida surrounded by all the tribes of the apes, and with Quetzalcoatl staring from beneath heavily lidded lashes at the whiteness of her.

Suddenly Kirby stirred to free his shoulder of Ivana's supine weight against it, and he made himself look down his rifle. He let the breath half out of his lungs, and nursed the trigger.

BUT he did not fire.

All at once he started so violently that he almost hurtled from the tree. Suddenly, trembling, he lowered his rifle.

"Oh, thank God!" he yelped in the silence of the night.

The idea which had transformed him was perhaps the conception of a lunatic. But it was still an idea, and offered a chance.

Again Kirby peered down his rifle. But he no longer aimed at Naida. As Quetzalcoatl lifted white fangs, Kirby aimed deliberately at him, and turned loose his fire.

With the first shot, the Serpent lurched back from the cage, snapped his jaws, and closed evil, black eyes. From one lidded socket squirted dark blood. As a second and third shot crashed into the cavernous fanged mouth, and others ripped into the flat skull, Quetzalcoatl seemed dazed. His head wavered back and forth and his hiss filled the night, but he did nothing.

But all at once Kirby felt that he was *going* to do something in a second, and a great calm came upon him. He quickly jammed home a fresh clip of shells.

"Nini! Ivana! Fire at the Serpent. Give him everything you've got! Do you understand? Fire! He thinks that the ape-people have hurt him, and he will be after them in a second. If we have any luck, he will do to them what we never could have done, and maybe destroy himself at the same time! Me, I'm going down there and get Naida now!"

CHAPTER XIII

NO sooner did Kirby see comprehension in the girls' faces than he swung around and let go of his perch. As he crashed, caught the next limb below him, and let go to crash to another, he had all he could do to suppress a yelp of joy. For all at once every voice in the ape congregation was raised in howls and screams of devastated terror.

He did not care how he got down from the tree. Seconds and half seconds were what counted. From the last limb above the ground he swung into space, and a split second later staggered to his feet, clutched his rifle, and started for the clearing. His lungs seemed collapsed and both ankles shattered. He did not care. Not when the ape screams were growing louder with every step he took. Not when he heard Nini and Ivana pouring down from their tree a continuation of the scorching fire he had started.

Panting, his breath only half regained, but steeled to make the fight of his life, he tore from the jungle into the clearing just in time to see a twisting, pain-convulsed seventy-foot coil of white muscle lash up and strike Naida's cage a blow which knocked it like a ball in the air. Naida screamed and hung to the bars.

But she was all right. It was not against her that Quetzalcoatl was venting his wrath: the blow had been blind accident. As Kirby stood at the clearing's edge, he knew to a certainty that Quetzalcoatl's reaction to sudden pain had been all he had dared hope.

In front of him forty or fifty ape-bodies lay in a crushed heap. While yard after yard of the Serpent's bleached length streamed out of the hole, the hundreds of feet of coils already in the clearing suddenly whipped about a whole squadron of ape-men, and with a few constrictions annihilated them as if they had been ants. Across the clearing, the leprous head reared up as high as the trees and swooped down, fangs gleaming. The howls of the ape-men trying to flee, the screams of those who had been caught, rose until they became all one scream.

BUT Kirby had not left the safety of the tree merely to get a ringside view of carnage. He faced his next, his final task unhesitatingly. Straight out he leaped from the shadows of the jungle into the clearing, out into the presence of the beleaguered, screaming ape-men. Well enough he knew that those creatures, despite their frenzy, might sight him and fall upon him at any second; well enough he knew that a single flick of the white coils all over the clearing could crush him instantly. But the time to worry about those hazards would be when they beset him. With a yell as piercing as any in the whole bedlam, Kirby rushed forward.

High up in the moonlit vault of the night, swaying between the two poles which supported it, hung the white cage which was Naida's prison. By the time Kirby had sprinted fifty yards, he knew that his yells had reached Naida. For she staggered to her knees and looked straight at him. A second later, though, he realized that the almost inevitable recognition of him by ape-men had come to pass.

Eight or ten of the creatures, left unmolested for a second by the Serpent, halted in the mad run they were making for the sheltering jungle, and while one pointed with hairy arm, the others let out shrieks. Kirby gritted his teeth in something like despair. Then he realized that the worst danger —Quetzalcoatl's blurred coils—was not threatening him so far. And he went on, straight toward the ape-men.

He did not look where, how, or at whom he struck. All he knew was that his rifle blazed, and as he clubbed at soft flesh with the butt, blood spurted, and new screams filled the night. He felt and half saw big, stinking bodies going down, and clawed his way for-

ward, around them, over them. Then he felt no more bodies, and knew that he was through. A little farther he ran over the trampled earth, and stopped and looked up.

The howls of the living, the shrieks of the dying deafened him. Renewed shots from the rifles in the tree, made the Serpent lash about in a dazzling white blur, smashing trees, apes, everything in its path. But Kirby, finding himself still safe, scarcely heard or saw. His eyes, turned upward, saw one thing only.

"Naida!"

SHE had snapped two of the withes of the cage and was leaning forward through the opening. Her face was livid with horror and exhaustion, but she was able to look at him with eyes that glowed.

"You—you came!" she gasped. "You came to me!"

In a flash Kirby jumped over to the poles and began to cast off one of the lines which held the cage aloft.

"Get ready for a bump!" he shouted, as he lowered away, arms straining.

Paying out the one line left the cage suspended from the second, but let it sweep from its position between the poles, down toward one pole. As the thing struck the tall support, Kirby bounded over to stand beneath it, only too sharply aware of the death waiting for him on every side, but ignoring it. Naida still hung suspended a good twenty feet above him, but there was no time to let go the other line. He braced himself and held up his arms.

"Jump!" he yelled.

Then he saw the white gown sweeping down toward him, felt the crash of a soft body against his, and staggered back. Recovered in a tenth of a second, he drew a deep breath, and looked at Naida beside him, tall and brave, unhurt.

"'Are you able to run?" he snapped, and then, the moment she nodded, motioned toward the jungle.

Behind them, in front, on all sides, rose screams so horrible that he wondered even then if he would ever forget. As he started to run, he realized that when Naida had finally landed in his arms, the nearest squirming loop of the Serpent had been no more than four yards away, and that, right now, if their luck failed, a single unfortunate twist of the incredible hundreds of feet of white muscle could still end things for them.

BUT luck was not going to fail. Somehow Kirby knew it as they sprinted side by side, and the sheltering jungle loomed closer every second. And a moment later, something beside his own inner faith made him know it, too.

"Look, Naida! Look!" he screeched all at once.

At the upper end of the clearing, where an unthinkable slaughter was going on, there leaped out from amongst a surging mass of apes, leaped out from almost directly beneath a downward smashing blur of white snake folds, a figure which Kirby had not seen or thought about for many seconds.

The Duca's robe hung in tatters from his body. Blood had smeared his white hair. His eyes were those of a man gone mad from fear. And as he escaped the tons of muscle which so nearly had engulfed him, he began to run even as Kirby felt himself running.

Straight toward him and Naida, Kirby saw the man spurt, but whether the mad eyes recognized them or not, he could not tell, nor did he care. All at once his feeling that they would escape the clearing, became conviction.

For suddenly the same single twitch of Quetzalcoatl's vast folds which might have finished them, if luck had not held, put an end to the Duca's retreat. At one moment the man's path was clear. The next—

Kirby, running for dear life, gasped, and heard Naida cry out beside him.

The great loops flashed, twisted, and

where had been an open way for the Duca, loomed a wall of scaly white flesh. The living wall twitched, closed in; and as the Duca dodged and leaped to no avail, a cry shrilled across the night—a cry that cut like a knife.

KIRBY saw no more. But it was likely that most, if not all, of the caciques had gone with the Duca.

Somehow, anyhow, in but a few seconds more, Kirby dove into the spot from which he had left the jungle to enter the clearing. As Naida pressed against him, winded but still strong, he found his best hopes for immediate retreat realized, for Gori, Nini, and Ivana, down from their tree, ran toward them.

"She is all right," he said with a gesture which cut short the outbursts ready to come. "But we've got to keep going. Ivana, tell Gori that her people are gone, wiped out, but that if she will cast her lot with us, we will not forget what she has done. Come on!"

With Gori leading them they ran, stumbling, recovering themselves, stumbling again. To breathe became an agony. But not until many minutes later, when they plowed into the cover of a fern belt whose blackness not even the moonlight had pierced, did Kirby call a halt.

Here he swept a final glance behind him, listened long for sounds of pursuit, and relaxed a little only when none came to disturb the night stillness. However, that relaxation, now that he permitted it at last, meant something.

The complete silence gave him final conviction that what he had said about the whole ape-people being destroyed was true. As for the Serpent—well, perhaps he was destroyed even as they were. Perhaps not. In any case the grip which Quetzalcoatl held upon the imagination of the People of the Temple had been destroyed by this night's work, and that was what counted most. The Serpent would be worshipped no longer.

KIRBY reached out in the darkness and found Naida's hand.

"Come along," he said to all of the party. "I think the past is—the past. And with Gori to guide us out of the jungle, and our own brains to guide us through the jungle of self-government after that, I think the future ought to be bright enough."

Ivana and Nini both chuckled as they moved again, and Gori, hearing her name spoken in a kindly voice, twitched her ears appreciatively. Naida drew very close to Kirby.

"What are you thinking about?" she asked presently.

"The—temple," he answered.

"About the crown which probably is still lying on the altar there?"

Kirby looked up in surprise.

"Why, I had forgotten about that!"

"What was it, then?"

"But what could I have been thinking about except how you looked when we came together in that gloomy place, and walked forward, side by side? *Now* have I told you enough?"

Naida laughed.

"There is so much to be done!" Kirby exclaimed then. "As soon as possible, we must climb to the Valley of the Geyser, go on into the outer world, and there seek carefully for men who are willing, and fit, to come here. And that is only one task. Others come crowding to me every second. But first—"

"What?" Naida asked softly.

"The temple. Naida, we will reach the plateau sometime to-morrow. All of the girls who kept watch there will be waiting for us, and it will be a time of happiness. May we not, then, go to the temple? There will be no priests. But we will make our pledges without them. Tell me, may I hope that it will be so—to-morrow?"

Naida did not answer at once. She did not even nod. But presently her shoulder, still fragrant with faint perfume; brushed his. She clasped his hand then, and as they walked on in silence, Kirby knew.

A Meeting Place for Readers of Astounding Stories

"Literature"

Dear Editor:

After comparison with various other magazines which specialize in the publication of Science Fiction, we—The Scientific Fiction Library Ass'n, of 1487 First Ave., New York City—have found that your magazine, Astounding Stories, publishes stories to which the term "literature" may be applied in its real sense. A fine example of this is the story "Murder Madness," by Murray Leinster. Others of the finer novels are: "The Beetle Horde," by Victor Rousseau, and, up to the present installment, "Earth, the Marauder," by Arthur J. Burks. "Brigands of the Moon," by Ray Cummings, was interesting and well-written, but it was not literature (not a story which you will remember and read over again). Of the shorter stories, the novelettes, the best are: "Spawn of the Stars," by Charles W. Diffin, "Monsters of Moyen," by Arthur J. Burks, and "The Atom Smasher," by Victor Rousseau.

Since the magazine started, there are only three stories that did not belong in the magazine, and were not even interesting. These are: "The Corpse on the Grating," by Hugh B. Cave; "The Stolen Mind," by M. Staley, and the last (I wonder that the editors who used such good sense in picking the other finer stories, let it pass), "Vampires of Venus," by Anthony Pelcher. May you keep up the high standard of fiction you are publishing at present.—Nathan Greenfeld, 873 Whitlock Ave., New York City.

You See—It Didn't!

Dear Editor:

Firstly, let me say that I am sending a year's subscription to Astounding Stories, which will tell you that they are good.

On the average, the stories are of good literary merit and plot. However, there is one thing that seems to be getting rather pushed into the background and that is the second part of your title, "Super-Science." If this is to be a Science Fiction magazine let us have it so. I am kicking against stories like "Murder Madness" and the like. They are really excellent in every way but just need that tincture of a little scientific background to make them super-excellent. "Brigands of the Moon" and "The Moon Master" seem to me more the type of story "our mag" should publish, from its name.

No doubt this criticism will leave you cold and this effusion find its way into the nearest waste paper basket, but I find that a number of your readers in Australia think somewhat the same as I do.

More brickbats—I hope not! and more bouquets—I hope so! the next time I write.—N. W. Alcock, 5 Gaza Rd., Naremburn, N. S. W., Australia.

Not in de Head!!

Dear Editor:

I shall be glad to take advantage of your cordial invitation to come over to "The Readers' Corner." In the first place, I find your magazine the best of its kind on the market, and you are to be congratulated on having such excellent authors as Ray Cummings, Murray Leinster and Captain S. P. Meek. Nevertheless, there are so many things to be criticized that I hardly know where to begin.

Let's start off with stories of future warfare. Although this class is potentially one of the most interesting, it is at the same time one of the most abused. Ray Cummings can write classics in this field, but the efforts of most the others are atrocities. I'll wager that their favorite childhood sport was mowing down whole regiments of lead soldiers with oxy-acetylene torches. It shows in their writings. Why can't they think of something original? Why can't they make their stories logical? The merits of a story are not dependent on the number of people wiped out by one blast of a death ray! But they all stick to the same old plot. A merciless but well-meaning scientist, or hordes from a foreign planet, wipe out thousands of American citizens at one blow. Hundreds of airplanes are disintegrated before they discover that the enemy is invulnerable. An ultimatum in domineering tones gives the terror-stricken populace forty-eight hours in which to surrender. But, all unknown to the dastardly villains, an obscure young scientist labors to save his country and the girl he loves. Fifteen minutes before the time set in the ultimatum he perfects a new weapon that soon sends the invaders to their well merited fate.

Surely you realize how ridiculous the whole affair is. It is only slightly less nauseating than the plot used in the stories of advanced civilizations where the hero is conducted on a sight-seeing tour by the individual in whose path he popped upon entering this new world. I can't believe that more than a handful of my fellow beings are of such low intelligence that they can find enjoyment in such trash. You will notice that although every reader has a different list of favorite authors, Ray Cummings has his name in practically every list. He is easily your favorite author. Ray Cummings does not wipe out whole cities at one time. His heroes do not save the world by inventing a new weapon at a moment's notice. His wars are not of forty-eight hours' duration. His conquerors do not attempt to win the war by one great attack on New York City. Do try to have your authors write logical stories.

I would now like to criticize the love element in your stories. I do not claim that there should be none whatever from cover to cover of your magazine, but I do claim that there should be none unless it really helps the plot. Most of your authors seem to think that a girl is necessary in every plot and so they bring her in, disregarding the fact that they do not know how to handle such material. The way it stands now, the heroine is introduced in a lame, routine fashion; is rescued once or twice; and accepts the hero as a husband in an altogether lame fashion.

There are many other points but they can wait. Logical war stories, no Utopias or sight-seeing tours, sensible love element, plus your present policy will make a corking magazine.—Philip Waite, 3400 Wayne Ave., New York, N. Y.

No Present Plans

Dear Editor:

Thanks for the new color cover. It certainly is a big improvement. The picture on the front of "our" magazine was just as astounding as the story by R. F. Starzl from which it was drawn. Let's have more stories from the pen of Mr. Starzl.

In my opinion "Beyond the Heaviside Layer" is the best story I have read in Astounding Stories to date. I am very pleased that you intend to print a sequel to it.

Now I would like to ask you a question. Do you intend to print an Annual or Quarterly, or do you think you will ever enlarge the size of this magazine? I don't care so much whether you enlarge the magazine or not, but I certainly would like to read an Annual or Quarterly.

Even though this letter meets the fate of thousands of other such letters and sees the inside of your wastebasket, I will at least have had the pleasure of writing to you and wishing "our" magazine success to the nth degree.—Forrest J. Ackerman, 236½ N. New Hampshire, Los Angeles, Calif.

"Excellent" to "So-So"

Dear Editor:

I notice a large number of subscribers are giving their opinions of Astounding Stories. I hate to be with the crowd, but I have to side with the majority in this case and say it's just about right.

My favorite writers are R. F. Starzl (that "Planet of Dread" was a peach), Chas. W. Diffin, A. Merritt, Ralph Milne Farley, Murray Leinster and Ray Cummings.

Now as to the August issue, here is how I rate them:

"Planet of Dread"—more than 20c. worth at the first crack. A real story.

"Lord of Space"—excellent. I meant to include Victor Rousseau in my list of favorites above.

"The Second Satellite"—so-so.

"Silver Dome"—so.

"Earth the Marauder"—too deep for me. And that Beryl stuff is sheer bunk.

"Murder Madness"—a real story. Get more like this.

"The Flying City"—too much explanation and description and not enough action.

Perhaps it looks like I'm sort of critical

after all, but I didn't mean it just that way. What I'm driving at is that Astounding Stories is by far superior to its competitors, and I'm telling you so because it might make you feel better to know it. If you want to print this testimonial, go to it. To tell the truth, I'll be looking for it.—Leslie P. Mann, 1227 Ogden Ave., Chicago, Illinois.

"Too Many Serials"

Dear Editor:

I have just finished the August issue, and I would like to tell you my opinion of it and the magazine as a whole.

The stories in order of merit were:

1—"The Second Satellite"; 2—"The Flying City"; 3—"Silver Dome"; 4—"The Lord of Space"; 5—"The Planet of Dread."

I won't pass judgment upon the serials, as I have not read all the parts.

In "The Flying City" there are a number of points I am hazy about. How could Cor speak English? However, this could be cleared up by saying that Cor sent out men to get the language, etc.

As a whole, Astounding Stories is a good magazine. There are too many serials, however, but since other readers like them I won't complain.

You have a fine array of Science Fiction authors. With such writers as Vincent, Meek, Hamilton, Starzl and Ernst, your magazine can't be anything but a success.

The September layouts look good to me. I hope it is.—E. Anderson, 1765 Southern Blvd., New York, N. Y.

Thanks, Mr. Glasser

Dear Editor:

Somewhat belatedly I am writing to commend you most heartily on the August issue of Astounding Stories, which I consider by far the finest number since the inception of the magazine last January. The authors whose work appeared in this issue are among the greatest modern writers of fantasy and scientific fiction. Leinster, Burks, Hamilton, Rousseau—what a brilliant galaxy! And Starzl, Vincent, Rich; all writers of note. If ever a magazine merited the designation "all-star number," your August issue filled the bill.

However, I am confident that even this superb achievement will be surpassed by some future edition of Astounding Stories, for each succeeding number to date has improved on the one before. And with a new Cummings novel in the offing, it seems the August issue, despite its excellence, will speedily be eclipsed.—Allen Glasser, 1610 University Ave., New York, N. Y.

Are Our Covers Too "Gaudy"?

Dear Editor:

This is the first time that I have ventured to air my views to any magazine, but as yours interests me greatly I hereby shed my reticence.

I believe, of all magazines of your type, you have come nearest perfection. But there are just a few things that bother me, and, no doubt, others like me. In the first place, must you make your covers as lurid and as contradictory to good design as they are? Really, I blush when my newsdealer hands me the gaudy thing. People interested in science do not usually succumb to circus poster advertising.

Then there are the stories. I realize that you must cater to all tastes, but some of them are very childish, slightly camouflaged fairy tales. Science Fiction can be written very convincingly, as is testified by the stories of H. G. Wells, Ray Cummings, Jules Verne, and others. These writers attain their effects by the proper use of the English language, without silly and obviously tacked-on romance, the use of known scientific facts elaborated sensibly and by not trying to make a novel out of a short story.

The stimulation of the imagination from Science Fiction is most enjoyable and I shall continue to read your magazine even though my fault finding is not considered, for, as I said before, you certainly have come nearer my ideal than any of the others.—Hector D. Spear, 867 W. 181st St., The Tri-Sigma Fraternity, New York City.

Nossir—Our Astronomy Is O. K.

Dear Editor:

I am taking advantage of your invitation to write to you. Since Astounding Stories is available you have given me a lot of pleasure, and I hope you may get a little pleasure out of reading this.

First, I want to say that you're hitting the ball as far as I'm concerned. I could hardly suggest an improvement.

In the August issue I liked "Planet of Dread," by R. F. Starzl, best. When that thing in the "pipe" grabbed me, I mean Gunga, wow! And it gave me a lot of satisfaction to see the Master in "Murder Madness," by Murray Leinster, get it in the neck. "Lord of Space" was good, too. In fact all the stories were good. I have only read two or three I really did not like since you started.

Say, I never heard of a planet named Inra. Don't you think your author ought to brush up on his astronomy? I also noticed some other authors are a little weak on astronomy; not that I'm complaining. The stories are O. K. with me.—Harry Johnson, 237 E. 128th St., New York City.

Mr. Yetter Checks Up on Us

Dear Editor:

As I am a constant reader of Astounding Stories I wish to say that though S. P. Meek is one of my favorite authors his story, "Cold Light," was a little wrong when he called the "Silver Range" by the name of "Stilwater Range." I also think it would have been better if he had had a car take Dr. Bird and Carnes out to the hills, because even in Fallon a burro is a strange sight.

But Meek, Cummings, Burks and all the rest of our famous authors' stories should be

in the magazine often. If Verrill, Wells, Nathenson and Hamilton would also write, the magazine would be perfect.

I like all the stories, though some seem to be copies, and others lack science.

Here is for a long life for Astounding Stories!—Frank Yetter, 369 Railroad Ave., Fallon, Nevada.

"Charm All Its Own"

Dear Editor:

Let me congratulate you. I have just read "The Planet of Dread," by R. F. Starzl, in your August issue of Astounding Stories.

Real science, you know, is pretty rigidly limited, but super-science of the kind you seem to run has a freshness and charm all its own.

I came upon your magazine quite by accident, and from now on no doubt will look for it as I stand before the racks of magazines, trying to decide upon something to read.—Anton J. Sartori, 1330 W. 6th St., Los Angeles, Calif.

Inra Could *Exist*

Dear Editor:

You will have to excuse this old telegraph office typewriter. It is all I have to express my appreciation to you for the tremendously interesting magazine you put out. I have only read the last three issues, but those are enough to convince me that Astounding Stories fills a long-felt want. I read all the others too, but from now on I'm going to look over their offerings at the stand before I buy. They have to go some to come up to the standard set by you, especially in the August copy.

That story, "The Plant of Dread," was the most weird, exciting, thrilling, satisfying—in short, the most "astounding" story I have ever read. Nothing has seemed so real since I first read Wells' stories. I liked the characters. Poor Gunga. I could just see him, trying to sacrifice the man he obviously worshipped to stop that horrible noise. The picture of Gunga on the cover was just exactly what I would expect the Martian to look like. You have a good artist. I liked Mark Forepaugh, too. He didn't lose his nerve for one minute—not Mark. Who says civilization is going down, when the future holds men like that?

Next to "The Planet of Dread" I liked "The Lord of Space." That was a vivid and well-drawn story, too. Those two, I think, were the outstanding stories for August. But I must not forget "Murder Madness," the serials it was thrilling and convincing. That's the only kick I have: so many stories sound thin. I don't believe them when I read them. I also want to mention "The Forgotten Planet" and "From An Amber Block." Good, exciting, and you can believe them without too much strain.

Oh, by the way, the author of "The Planet of Dread" made a mistake when he chose a mythical planet for his terrific adventures. Why not Venus or Mercury? If they have water the conditions on them would be similar to what he described for Inra. There ain't no sech planet. But why expect perfection! I'm satisfied.

I wish you success. That's a late wish. You're a success already.—Tom P. Fitzgerald, Newcastle, Nebraska.

Thus Ended the Quest

Dear Editor:

This is my first letter to your magazine, and right away I'm asking for a pair of sequels. One of these is to "The Moon Master," by Charles W. Diffin. These sad endings depress me greatly, but if I looked at the ending first to see whether or not it was sad it would ruin the story; and besides sad endings usually have good stories in front of them. The other sequel I want is to "From The Ocean's Depths," by Sewell P. Wright, and its sequel "Into The Ocean's Depths."

In looking over my back copies of the magazine I find that I have not disliked a single story. Thus endeth my quest for a brickbat.

Are you going to put out a quarterly? Both the other Science Fiction magazines that I get do so, and I observe that it gives opportunity for a story of full novel length all in one piece. Not that I object to serials, but I like once in a while to sit down to a long story without having to dig out three or four magazines. However, please continue the long serials, for what is life without the element of suspense?—Hugh M. Gilmore, 920 N. Vista St., Hollywood, Cal.

"The Readers' Corner"

All Readers are extended a sincere and cordial invitation to "come over in 'The Readers' Corner' " and join in our monthly discussion of stories, authors, scientific principles and possibilities—everything that's of common interest in connection with our Astounding Stories.

Although from time to time the Editor may make a comment or so, this is a department primarily for *Readers*, and we want you to make full use of it. Likes, dislikes, criticisms, explanations, roses, brickbats, suggestions—everything's welcome here; so "come over in 'The Readers' Corner' " and discuss it with all of us!

The Editor.

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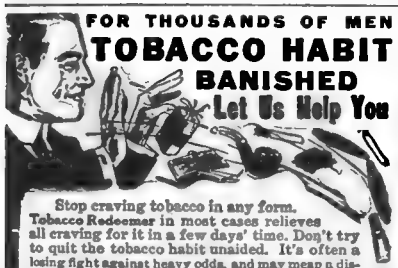

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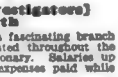

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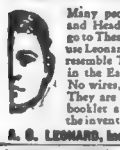

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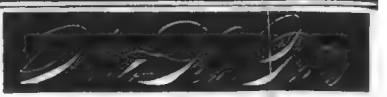

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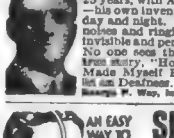

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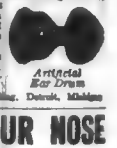

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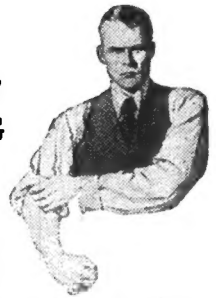

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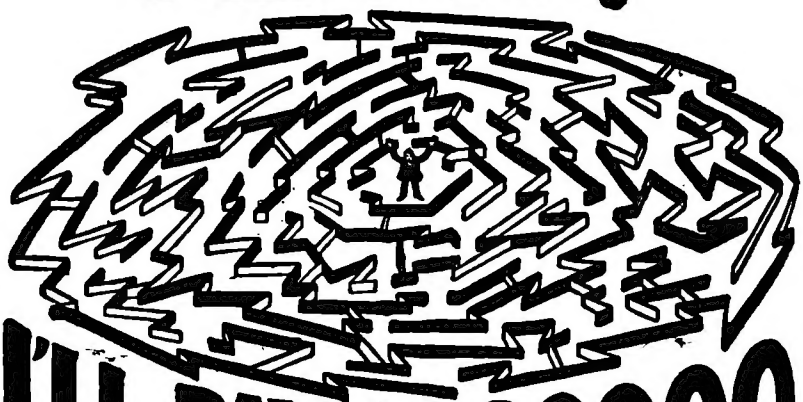

I'LL PAY $8000.00

Come to my rescue—QUICK! I'm HOPELESSLY LOST in these treacherous, trackless catacombes. I've tried for hours to find the right path to freedom but here I am right back in the middle again.

Can YOU Find the Right Path?

Will you try? A THOUSAND THANKS!—I knew you would. But first, let me warn you that *THERE IS ONLY ONE PATH* to freedom and it's,—Oh! so hard to find. It starts in the middle where I am and, WITHOUT CROSSING ANY OF THE WALLS, it ends somewhere on the outside of these terrible catacombes. I hope YOU can find THE RIGHT PATH to get me out. If you do, mark it plainly with pen or pencil and send it to me quick. IF CORRECT, I'll see that you are qualified at once for an opportunity to win as much as $2320.00 cash out of the $8,000.00 IN REWARDS that I'm going to give away.

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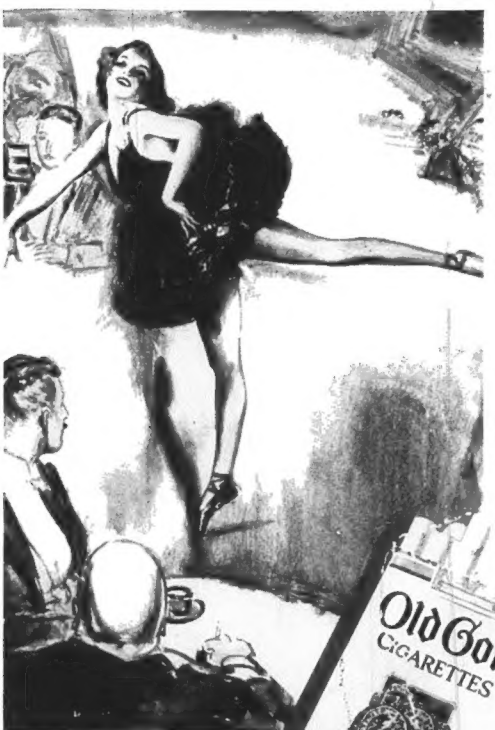

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